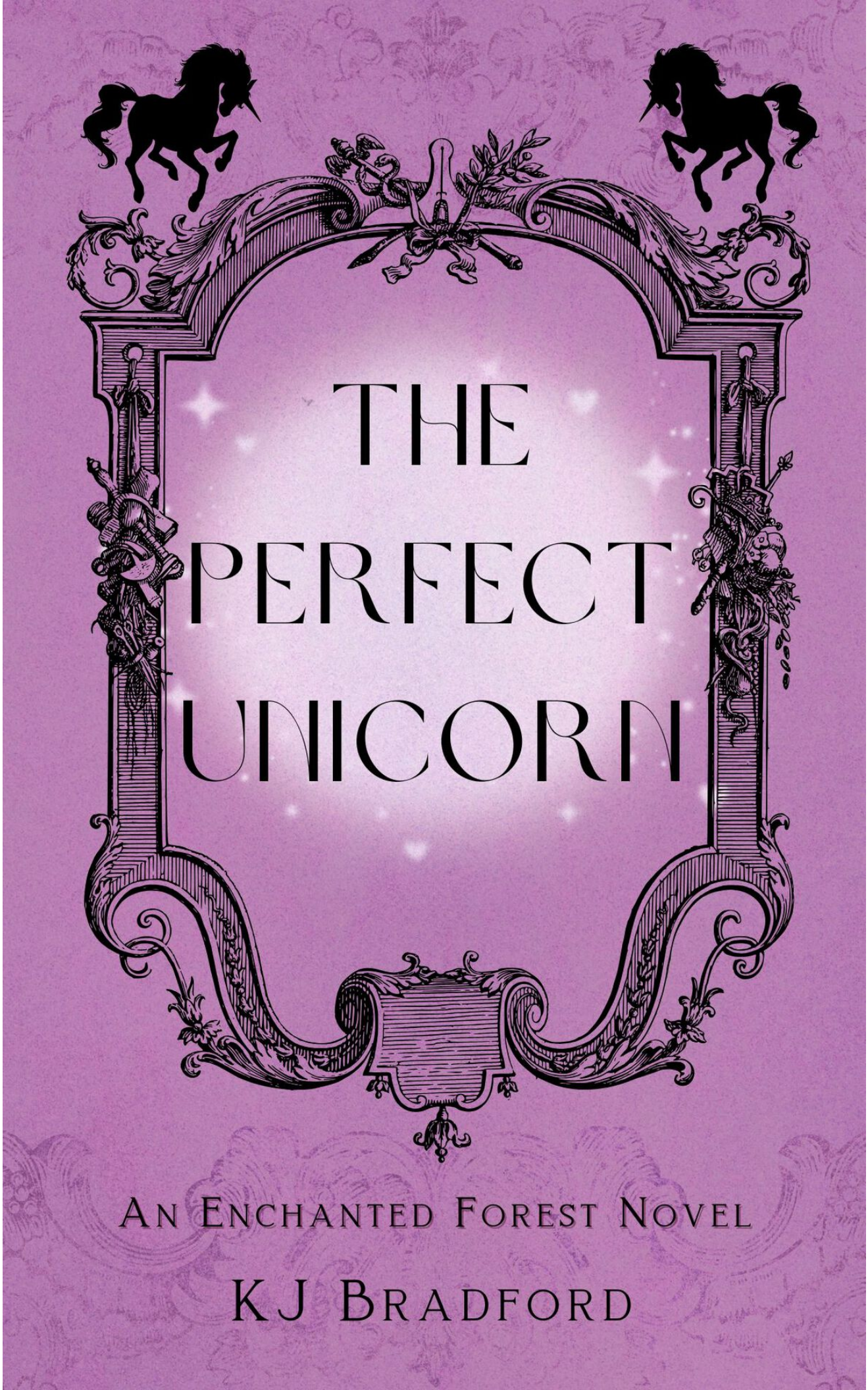
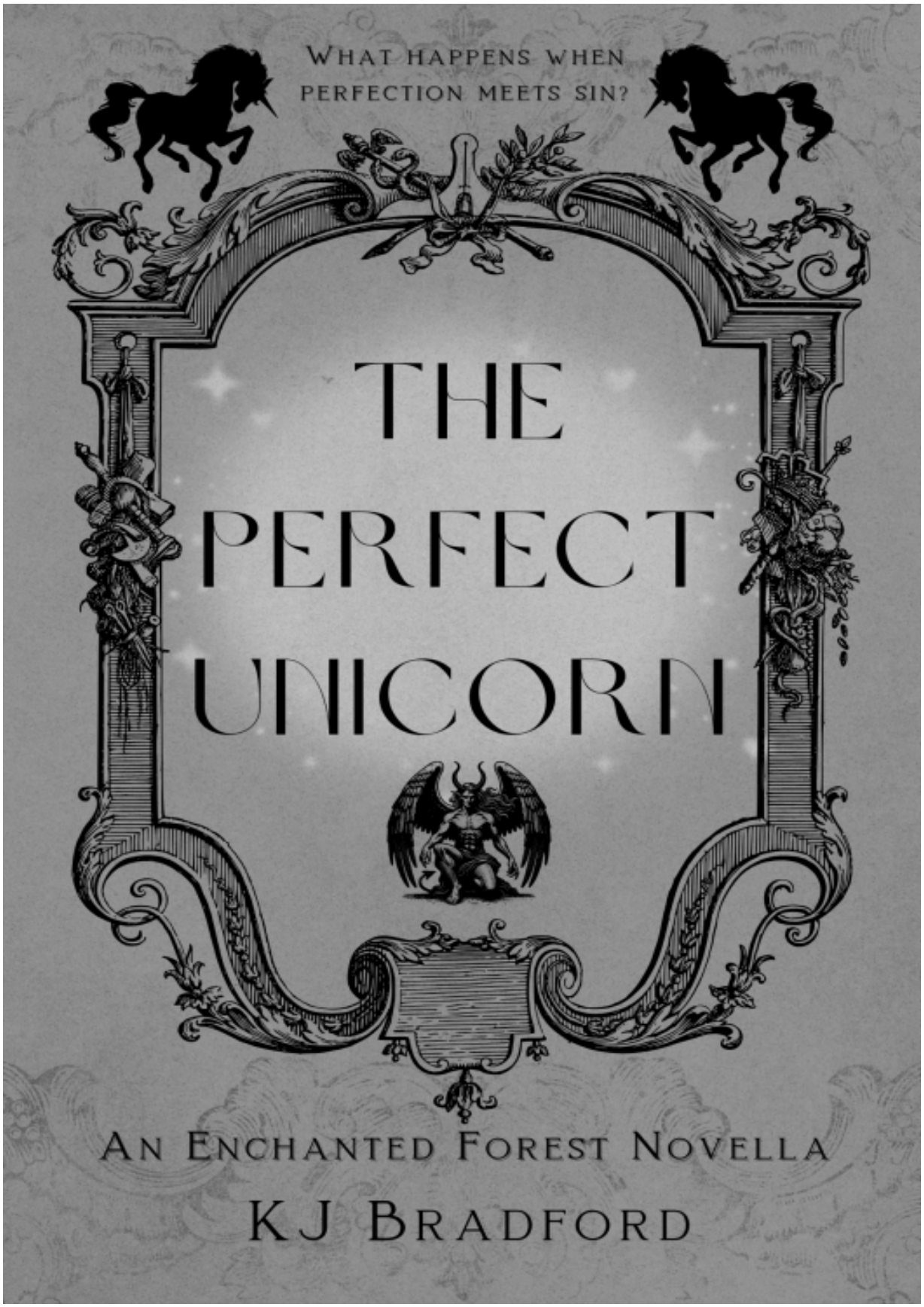


An Enchanted Forest Novel

KJ Bradford


WHAT HAPPENS WHEN
PERFECTION MEETS SIN?
THE
PERFECT
UNICORN
AN ENCHANTED FOREST NOVELLA
KJ BRADFORD

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ACKNOWELEDGEMENTS

The Perfect Unicorn
A Forest of Enchantment Novella
KJ Bradford

Also By KJ Bradford

The Library of Solaris series:
Legends of Ravens
Enchanted Forest Series:
Lovers Through the Looking Glass: A Novella

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Author's Note

The Perfect Unicorn is a cozy fantasy with a few dark elements. There is nothing dark about the romance; our demon MMC is a perfect cinnamon roll, with a dark past. There is mention/implication of child abuse, sexual assault, and grooming. There is mention of a traumatic birth resulting in the death of the mother. **None of this is shown on page.**

This is a love story first and foremost, and when two adults are in love, sometimes they fuck. There's some ole consensual fuckin' in here, but both of our inhuman characters have humanoid forms so there will be no horse porn.

If any of the aforementioned things aren't your cup of tea, either put the book down or proceed with caution.

Dedication

For my melanated girlies who want to see themselves at the center of the fairytale, this one's for you.
And for everyone who's worn themselves thin trying to fit the box society put them in, it's time to break the fucking mold.

Playlist

Sugar! Honey! Love! by Kali Uchis
For: You by Kali Uchis
All I Can Say by Kali Uchis
Zephir by La Belle Viesfc /scannowg
Derniere danse by Greg Gontier
Sante by Spill Tab
Eve by Precious Pepala

PROLOGUE

Never share even a single drop of your blood.

–First Commandment of The First Unicorn

Once upon a time, there was a dying princess.

The princess had become a slip of a girl in her illness, rarely able to keep down more than bread and broth. Her cheeks were wan, eyes dull, hair brittle, and the stench of death hung over her like a veil.

"She hasn't much longer for this world," the King's hag told him solemnly.

What kind of King trusts a hag? She probably caused the illness! I interrupted the story with Heartspeak, behaving like an unmannered simpleton. But it was only Orina and I sitting beneath the Sacred Tree, and she never seemed to mind when I let my perfection slip.

Humans never live long enough to outgrow their foolishness, only long enough to believe they do. Now, shut up and let me tell the story. She responded, humor coating her words as her melodic voice filled my mind.

Orina was full of stories, being one of the few unicorns that frequently ventured out of our Garden of Eden. But more importantly, she was the only one, aside from Myrella, who seemed to enjoy speaking with me.

Orina was like me in the sense that she was different, but she was considered unique for it. Her distinct appearance was praised, while mine was shunned.

Orina was iridescence given physical form. From her eyes to her hair, you could not place a color to them because they were *all colors*. Like opals, like our tears, like her horn. Even her umber skin had a golden glow about it. Her luminescent eyes shone through the mass of loose curls

shrouding her face, and though I couldn't see it, I got the sense she was quirking a brow at me in question. Tucking an auburn loc behind my ear, I nodded, beckoning her to continue. She resumed the story right where she left off:

"There must be something that can be done!" The King cried.

"There is one thing," the hag said. "But it's far too dangerous."

"This is my daughter we're talking about! Nothing is too dangerous. Tell me what it is and I will have it done."

"Very well," the hag agreed, rubbing her knobby knuckles. "You must send your bravest knight deep within the Mysticwood to find the blood of a unicorn. Only that will cure what ails her."

And so the King did just that, Orina intoned, her voice soft and melodic. "This was many, many centuries ago, back when The First still walked among us. We hadn't known the dangers of man then, and there were no briars around our sanctuary, no wall to keep out anyone who made it into our garden." She gestured around in a wide swoop of her arm.

Our Garden, as we called it, was more of a village. Sprawling greenery littered with homes and buildings crafted of pure amethyst. The homes were all cloaked in crawling plants, their vines heavy with juicy roseberries. At the center of our village was the Sacred Tree. It was as tall as ten old elms stacked atop each other, and just as wide. At its base were knotted roots that squirmed like a nest of snakes, and in its branches were the eggfruit. They looked like pink pomegranates when they were small, and as they grew, the branches they hung from would droop closer to the ground like the hand of a goddess reaching toward the earth.

"The bravest knight of the Mundane Kingdom had not a malicious bone in his body," Orina said.

"When he found the Sanctian Sanctuary, he bent a knee to us unicorns and kindly requested a single drop of blood. He wanted only to save the princess, and since his intentions were selfless and pure, he didn't incur the wrath of the Chitterfang. The First stepped up, offering her blood so no one else would have to, the perfect leader that she was."

Orina's piety seemed contrived. I frowned at the note of sarcasm in her voice and her lips quirked in a knowing smile like we were sharing a secret.

"The knight took the blood back to the princess and immediately upon consuming it was healed. The King was so grateful that he offered his daughter's hand to the knight and they lived happily ever after."

That was...anticlimactic.

"Because that's not the full story," Myrella approached, her tail flicking with barely contained annoyance.

Even anger was comely on her. Myrella was easily the most beautiful of all my sisters. Her earthen brown skin a few shades darker than my light mahogany tone, and completely unmarred. Her waves hung to her hips, shining like liquid moonlight, pale like the hair of all the other unicorns. Even in her Sanctian form—with the torso of a woman and legs of a faun—she exuded majesty.

"The Mundane King was in awe of what a single drop of our blood could do and demanded more," her voice dripped with more disdain that I thought a unicorn capable of. "His bravest knight refused but not all knights were as benevolent as he. In fact, he may have been the only knight with a shred of kindness because the rest of the knighthood had no problem raiding the Mysticwood. Unicorns were hunted. The Chitterfang could only do so much against an army of greedy men and many of us were lost. The First used all of her magic to build our wall of briars and raise the labyrinth of trees around our sanctuary. She sacrificed herself to protect us, and we honor her by following her commandments."

ONE

You must always remain pure.

—Second Commandment The First Unicorn

FOR OVER NINETY-NINE years, I've never even considered breaking a rule. Until today. Today was a day so full of firsts that it was almost a rebirth.

Perfection wasn't a realistic standard for humans. It was an unattainable goal at best, and a self-sabotaging fantasy at worst.

For unicorns, it was the expectation. Appearance, behavior, magic—it all had to be perfect. Every moment of every day for one hundred years, Sanctians had to be perfect, benevolent, and chaste beings. Only then would we be able to complete our shift and receive our horns.

I hatched imperfect in appearance. My curls were tight when they should have been loose, my body soft and plump where it was meant to be hard and lean, and I was over half a foot shorter than all my six foot tall sisters. If all that wasn't damning enough, I had a birthmark.

No one had birthmarks aside from the diamond shape on our heads where our horn would come in. No one had moles or freckles, and if they were careful enough–and most were–they didn't even have scars.

A mark aside from the hornmark was reason enough for pity–because Sanctians were much too kind-hearted to outwardly shun, but not at all above pitying to the point of condescension–but my birthmark was huge.

My otherwise smooth, light mahogany skin was marred with a reddish brown splotch, covering my right eye from brow to cheek. As if someone had thrown red mud on my face and it'd never washed off, or so I have been so politely told. I'd only seen my reflection in the spring we drank

from. I didn't think I looked that bad, but what did I know? I was born wrong.

Though I'd been born the same way we all were: bursting free from an egg fruit of the Sacred Tree fully grown, my sisters say I must have come out too early.

Why else would she hatch looking like that?

Don't get too close, her taint will stain you.

Never mind that such an assertion meant doubting the judgment of the Sacred Tree, and in turn, the judgement of The First. But I'd be the one labeled blasphemous if I pointed that out.

First forbid I be labeled *blasphemous* on top of tainted. If I could not be flawless in appearance, I had to be beyond perfect in every other aspect.

I have never been unkind to even an insect. I practiced my magics by healing all the woodland creatures within our Garden of Eden, and I'd never even left the boundary of our home. Hornless Sanctian rarely did for fear of not receiving their horn. We all knew that breaking the commandments didn't keep you from getting your horn, that was just something told to hatchlings in their first decade, still, no one risked it.

Our little patch of forest at the heart of the Mysticwood was encased in a thick wall of briars that parted only for us; I'd never seen the wood beyond. Orina's stories of the world outside filled me with a longing I locked deep inside myself—purity was paramount to my petty desires.

No one could question my chastity if I'd never even seen a man. Orina left frequently and always had her memories checked upon return. Breaking the commandments was to risk banishment depending on who did the check. Myrella was a young Sanctian when The First was still with us, having seen her sacrifice for our safety, Myrella was not known for leniency. Why risk leaving at all when even accidentally touching a man was cause for banishment, depending on who did the memory check?

I did everything right. No one could question my character; no one could accuse me of being improper, impure, imperfect.

And yet.

Some of my sisters speculate my coming too early tainted the tree, others say I came too early because the tree was tainted. Chicken or egg, who knows which was first, right? Didn't matter because either way, our tree was tainted. Not a single egg fruit has grown large enough to hatch since I was born.

Being the perfect and righteous Sanctian that I was, it was only natural that I volunteer to search for the Seed of Life to heal our tree.

If I were a liar, that's what I'd have you believe. *But I am Iliyana Sanctitas and I am perfection incarnate, so I will be honest.*

I wanted Myrella's acceptance almost as much as I wanted my horn. She was perfect, she was a full unicorn, she was everything I wanted to be, and last night I overheard her solemnly agreeing that my birth had to be the reason for the tree's sickness.

She doesn't deserve her horn, one of the elders said.

Why would you say that? Myrella asked her. There was no need to question who *she* was.

It has been a century since the Tree has bore ripe fruit.

How can you be sure Iliyana is to blame?

She was the last to hatch. Who else could be at fault?

Myrella did not jump to my defense as she usually did and her silence cut me deeper than any words ever could.

I had to fix it. I had to make her see that I was good, I was perfect, I was just as worthy of a horn as she was.

And I wasn't sure I wanted to be here when my horn came in. Receiving one's horn had been compared to a mortal woman's childbirth in both pain and intensity. I didn't want to do that with sisters who thought our Great Tree's illness was my fault. What if my horncoming was as imperfect as my hatching?

I could still hear all their gasps, recall all their horrified expressions when I broke free from my egg. Myrella had been the first to touch me, trying desperately to clean what she thought was mud marring my face.

It should've been a joyous occasion—I learned that later—but I was met with pity. None of the elders would look me in the eyes for the first year of my life, afraid my imperfections would rub off on them. None but Myrella.

She convinced them that I only looked a little different, that I was just as Sanctian as the rest of them. I had to prove her right, earn the love from them she'd given freely.

Try as I might, I wasn't a strong enough healer to kiss our tree back to health. Myrella said our magics wouldn't work on the tree and politely hinted I was childish for trying, but in that (and nothing else), she was wrong.

When I healed, the pain of the injury passed over to me. It was an agony I carried with me always, shoving it down in the same deep corner of myself where I held my longing. I knew my magics worked when I kissed the smooth bark and I felt a cold, hollow pain in my chest. But no matter how long I kissed it, the pain wouldn't subside.

My only option was to leave our home and find the Seed of Life. It was up to me. So I ignored all my sister's whispers as I left the village a week ago.

Will Iliyana ever return?

Perhaps it would be better if she didn't.

How will she ever find the seed when it only reveals itself to the purest of unicorns?

I'd have my horn in just a few weeks, and then the seed would reveal itself to me. That's what I thought until I passed through the briars. The trek through the labyrinth of trees had only taken a few days with the woodland creatures showing me the way. A winged doe, a horned fox, and a jackalope had accompanied me. They tensed once I reached the briars, their fur standing on end as the thorny vines parted.

What is it? I projected the question to all of them.

Something is wrong, said the doe, its feathers quivering.

Mysticwood feels off, replied the fox. Its horns scraped against my calf as it wove between my legs.

I'm hungry, whined the jackalope, hopping away.

We'd barely made it a mile away from the labyrinth before the scent of blood hit my senses. The irony tang was thick in the air, burning my throat and making my stomach churn. Thinking a creature of the forest was hurt, I ran toward the awful smell.

It wasn't an animal I found, but a man, the muscled plains of his chest telling me as much. He was beneath a pomegranate tree, the grass around him stained a deep red.

Instinct made me rush to his aid, but perfection made me stop just before touching him. Myrella's voice was in my head, reminding me of the commandments.

Man or not, he was still a living creature. What was benevolence if not helping when you could, even if you didn't have to? *Especially* when you didn't have to. Standing over him, my hands shook as I clutched them to my chest, biting my lip.

When I returned and Myrella checked my memories, would she be proud of me for not touching him, or ashamed that I watched him die?

Despite my worries, I found myself inching closer to him. It wasn't in my nature to witness such pain and do nothing about it. Orina had once explained to me the way humans were born: not hatched from a tree but grown from the belly of a woman and gifted with something called a mother with the help of something called a father. Two humans could create entire families on their own.

Walking away from him meant not only killing him but condemning all those other lives to unimaginable grief. I wouldn't be worthy of my horn if I let this man perish at my feet.

An awful gurgling sound left him as blood bubbled from his lips and I rushed into action. Kneeling beside him, I cupped my trembling hands around his face. His cheeks were clammy, his jaws rough with short facial hair. Electricity shot up my arms at the contact and I prayed the Sacred Tree forgive me, that the First would find the kindness not to condemn me. I sucked in one last steadying breath and then I kissed him.

For the first time in my life, I'd broken a rule. And for a moment, his lips were so soft that I'd forgotten to care.

Then the pain came. White hot and nauseating.

It was a great effort not to snatch away from him. Before this, the worst injury I'd healed was the broken wing of a flying hare. I thought that was the greatest agony I could experience. How could anyone, let alone a human, sustain so many injuries and still draw breath?

He had at least three broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder, various new cuts and many old bruises, but the worst of all of it was what was killing him. The gaping wound in his gut that made all but agony cease to exist.

My vision swam, my breath stolen from my lungs. A muffled cry forced itself from my throat—the first sound I'd made in years. Opals slipped from my eyes and I wanted it all to end. I thought I might die with him, that my magic would fail like it did with the tree and I'd die before I ever got my horn and I thought myself an idiot for throwing everything away for a fallen stranger in the woods. But still I kissed him, because what else could I do? I'd broken our most sacred rule; there was no changing that. What a waste it would be if I tainted myself with the touch of man and he still died.

I kept my lips pressed firmly to his, crying softly from the pain and the emotional turmoil arising from my choice. Tiny opals fell from my eyes,

tears shed for my ruined chastity, for perfection I'd thrown away, and for sheer hope that it would work. I poured all my magics into him and he gave me all his pain in turn. And finally, blessedly, the agony began to ease.

But I didn't dare break the kiss until it was completely gone. When I did pull away from him, I struggled for breath, sucking deep gulps of air. My head spun in vicious circles and my vision blurred as sweat dripped along my brow.

And maybe I should've been ashamed of all the imperfect things I'd done today, but I collapsed against him with a smile tugging at my lips, because perfection aside, I'd taken the first step in becoming the kind of unicorn that I would look up to. For the first time, I'd made a decision based on what would make me proud, my sisters be damned.

MY DREAMS WERE ALWAYS the same. They began with love and ended with hate.

It was the same memory each time, morphed by the cruel hands of my subconscious. The sun was as pleasant as the inside of my egg once was. It was as warm as I imagined a mother's hug might be, casting our Garden of Eden in golden light.

My sisters surrounded me and we were all immaculate and ephemeral as we danced 'round our Sacred Tree. Song and laughter took physical form; a living rainbow, serpentine in its shape, glowing as it coiled around us.

For once, I did not stand out. My height matched theirs, my body slim and corded with muscle, my face unmarred. My hair still had an auburn shade to it, but it was paler, and my curls were fat and loose, cascading down my back in rosy waves.

Myrella and a few other elders were prancing around in unicorn form and grazing on sweet flowers. Orina sat beneath the Sacred Tree, all the egg fruit still pale pink and too small to make the branches hang.

I was only in my third decade and still used my voice freely, singing while Orina played the harp. She didn't shield her face behind her curls yet, and I loved the way her eyes glittered like diamonds.

And then the hate came.

It began with a scream. Orina wailed, dropping her harp as she doubled over, clutching her forehead. Her horn was coming, but it was much too early. She was only in her fourth decade. A horncoming before a century

was unheard of. Opals tumbled into her lap, slipping down her skirt as she cried. I ran to her side, but another scream rang out and one of the elders was back in Sanctian form, grabbing my arms.

"Get away from her," she growled, all her features distorted and demonic in her disgust.

The glamour had fallen away and I was no longer as beautiful as the rest of them. I couldn't see myself but I could tell in the way she now towered over me, the way I could feel her focus narrowing to my birthmark, the rest of me invisible.

"This is your fault," another elder shouted.

I shook my head. I was shrinking. Or everyone else was growing, all their elegant limbs stretching horrifically long. The sun turned away from me and frost crawled along my hooves and up my plush torso.

"Your taint rubbed off on her," someone else chimed in. The serpentine rainbow of laughter morphed into a real serpent, its scales so violet they were nearly black. It slithered toward me, grass dying around it.

"Her premature horncoming is the Sacred Tree's way of fighting the poison of your imperfection, Iliyana."

Orina was bleeding now, her horn coming in fast. The sky darkened but her screams lit it up like lightning. Crimson coated her face as her pearlescent horn stabbed through her head like a scythe through a soul.

"Please," I begged. I never knew what I was asking for. Acceptance? Forgiveness? To be allowed to go to Orina? "Please," I cried, opals dripping down my cheeks.

I turned to Myrella but she looked away from me, shame darkening her features.

The snake wrapped its body around mine, its scales cold around my neck. "Please," I rasped as it cut off my air flow.

You taint us, Iliyana.

You taint us.

You taint us.

They spoke as one now, all their voices overlapping inside my mind, their rejection piercing my heart like stakes of ice.

Hoarfrost formed over my chest, icy claws creeping along my skin. This was the part where I would freeze over, a sculpture of ice with a black serpent strangling me, its forked tongue flicking over my horrid birthmark.

A new voice entered my mind, dark and smooth as velvet, and warm, so warm. I'd never heard anything like it—a man's voice. It wrapped me in its embrace, lulling me back to safety and sunshine with a song of love and acceptance.

The serpent disappeared in a puff of smoke, the ice broke away, snowflakes blowing in the wind like stardust. My entire dreamscape changed and my tears were forgotten as I bounced on clouds and slid down rainbows.

TWO

You must never touch a man.

—Third Commandment of The First Unicorn

WHEN I WOKE, IT WAS to a pair of violet eyes looking at me like I was already everything I wanted to be. There was awe in his expression like he saw no imperfection. He took in all of me, unflinching as his gaze roved over my birthmark. He glanced at it as if it were just another part of me and not something that ruined me.

My lips parted as I stared back at him, my heart fluttering and skin buzzing. Shame heated my face, the idea of being perceived as embarrassing as it was delightful. It took me far too long to notice how indecent I'd been.

I'd passed out *on top of him*. He used one of his muscular arms as a pillow while the other wrapped around me, stroking my locs. My sleeveless dress dipped low, while he wore an open vest with nothing beneath. My body hummed everywhere his bare skin touched mine.

He brushed one of my locs away from my face and murmured to me in low tones.

"You're the most enchanting creature I've ever seen." The compliment rolled off his tongue as simply as one stating the sky was blue. I blushed the way I did when Myrella praised me but the feeling was accompanied by something else, something new and wonderful that I didn't have a name for.

It was chocolate on the tongue, warm and rich and delectable. Perhaps it was relief. I'd never wanted to believe my appearance was as unsightly as my sisters described and he was looking at me like I had all the perfection they pitied me for lacking.

And it felt good. The caress of his gaze was so treacherously delicious that I'd forgotten myself.

I hopped to my feet and instantly regretted it because the entire forest spun around like it wanted me to lose my breakfast. I clamped a hand over my mouth while the other reached out wildly searching for the support of a tree. The man caught me as I fell, cradling me in sturdy arms.

"You should rest," he said.

I almost snapped, fussing rudely that I was fine but I recovered before I projected the words, the unseemly tone they were wrapped in.

Thank you for your concern, but I am fine.

He didn't seem to hear me because he just kept talking over me, questions spilling out of him like grain from a torn sack.

"Are you an Elf? Is that how you healed me? Elven magic? I'd heard a few migrated over into the Mysticwood, but I never thought I'd run into one. Are they all as beautiful as you?"

I wanted to ask him the same.

Were all men as gorgeous as him?

Myrella had always described them as vile beasts, but he was anything but. He had curls as tight as my own, all neatly braided into cornrows atop his head, the sides shaved low. A long silver earring hung from one delicately pointed ear, hoops lining the other but they could hardly hold my attention when his eyes were so arresting. They were the deep violet of the sky just after the sun's retreat. His oak brown skin was so luminous I wanted to feel it against my own, my heart skipping a beat at the lecherous thought.

What was wrong with me? Heat crawled up my chest and his full lips quirked at the corners like he knew he was the cause of my blush.

My gaze fell to the enchanted necklace resting atop my breasts as I fiddled nervously with the silver-wrapped labradorite. It was supposed to make me appear human—hiding my hooves and tail—until nightfall, but it was entirely possible that the sister who'd magicked it didn't know what humans looked like. Most of us tended to avoid them.

Chastity wasn't the only reason we were forbidden from coming in contact with men. It was said that men were so greedy that there was little they wouldn't do to bleed a unicorn dry—humans claimed our blood worked miracles. I supposed they were right; a drop every few moon cycles kept all our gardens flourishing and the magic of the forest alive. But

humans were never satisfied with a drop. They wanted to bathe in our blood.

I figured it didn't matter if he thought me mortal or Elven, as long as he didn't know I was of the tribe of women who became unicorns, Sanctian.

Yes, I answered rather than questioning his addictive beauty. *I'm an Elf.*

And immediately cringed because I'd never told a lie before. I'd been in his presence for all of a few minutes and was prepared to break another commandment. Myrella would be ashamed.

I was grateful he didn't seem to hear me. To think, my first words to him would've been a betrayal. It wasn't as if I owed him the truth of my identity, but I'd saved his life—we were no longer strangers. And the lie left a dirty weight in my gut I didn't want.

"Can you understand me?" He asked. "Do Elves speak a different language? What's your name?" he asked before I could address his first question. Great tree, were they all this talkative? "I'm Vesper," he said.

"Vethper," I stumbled over his name, finally realizing heartspeak didn't work with him.

His violet eyes sparkled like twilight when he smiled at me and my foolish lungs forgot to do their job.

"You can call me Vez," he said without dropping that breathtaking smile. His canines were sharp and the sight of them made me wet my lips. "What's your name, little Elf?"

My nostrils flared at the descriptor. He was just as tall as my sisters, so of course he found me little. At least he hadn't called me little chonk or little mule and tried to convince me it was endearing. Clenching my jaw, I barely suppressed the urge to roll my eyes as I introduced myself.

"I am Iliyana."

"Iliyana," he repeated my name like it was a gift he was unworthy of, but wanted desperately, and I forgave him immediately. Unicorns were meant to be benevolent after all.

My cheeks heated again as he stared at me and his smile grew impossibly brighter. I needed to leave. I'd spent far too much time with this man as it was. Perhaps my touching him would be forgiven since I only did it to save his life but I needed to part ways now before I allowed myself to break another rule.

My eyes were stuck on him. His vest was ruined with blood so he'd opted to go shirtless. I barely managed to extract myself from his arms–not

because he held me tight, he released me the moment I pushed away from him–but I hadn't wanted the contact to end. I was shamefully grateful when he fell in step beside me as I walked.

More animals had gathered since I'd passed through the briars, but they were keeping their distance now. Orange squirrels leapt through the canopy, birds sang overhead, and brightly colored lizards skittered underfoot. Though the creatures were all following me, their eyes were on him. I couldn't blame them their perusal, but suspicion was radiating off them in waves.

"What beast put you on death's doorstep?" I asked him at the animals' insistence.

The sun loved him, its rays caressing him through the canopy and giving him an angelic quality. When he smiled this time, I got the sense it was meant to deceive. His beauty felt unholy in the temptation it roused in me.

"A terrifying bastard," his canines flashed, his grin as threatening as it was alluring. "Thank you for saving me, Iliyana." He dropped his voice to that low murmur that did things to me that I didn't understand. "Is there anything I can do to repay you?"

"No."

"Oh?" He sounded disappointed.

"I only meant that I did not save you because I expected reciprocity. It was simply the right thing to do."

I hoped that was true.

His eyes glittered, his expression like the first light of the day, all warmth.

"Aren't you kind."

"Of course, I'm perfection incarnate."

I hadn't realized I'd said it aloud until he erupted with laughter. I covered my mouth as if that would hide my shame. This was why I preferred Heartspeak. When I used my voice, words left my mouth unbidden. That wasn't possible with Heartspeak; it was a more intimate way of communicating that left no room for misunderstanding. Words were never heard unless one projected them forward, and they carried your intent with them.

"I'm inclined to agree," he said once his laughter, which sounded way too much like music for my liking, faded.

“You’re quite jovial for a man”—the word was strange on my tongue, as indecent and enticing as forbidden fruit—“who nearly tasted death.”

“Shouldn’t I be? Only a few hours ago, I was sure I’d drawn my last breath. But now I owe my life to the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. I couldn’t be happier.”

I stared at him, biting my lip as I tried to contain my smile at the joy in his expression. It was a fruitless effort. I couldn’t look away from him, away from the sharp teeth behind luscious lips, his broad shoulders, or his muscular arms. I’d have been better off closing my eyes, but I’d already stumbled twice since we’d begun walking and I couldn’t afford to humiliate myself further. Where had my easy grace gone? Why were my cheeks permanently warmed by his presence?

This man was a blight on my perfection, and I needed to get away from him.

But I wanted to keep talking to him.

“Well,” I cleared my scratchy throat. I hadn’t spoken this much in decades, but talking to him made my body warm and light–it was a sensation I’d rather chase than run away from. “You are most welcome....Vez.”

His eyes glittered again and I forced myself to turn away and walk faster. He had no problem keeping up with me. I didn’t know whether to be annoyed or grateful, but I tried for annoyed. I failed and *that* was annoying, but I was more frustrated with myself than him.

The longer I stayed with him the more danger I put myself in. It wasn’t just foolish, it was improper.

We couldn’t be friends, anyway. He was a man. Nothing good came from man and Unicorn interacting. Men couldn’t be trusted. I would never gain Myrella’s approval if she learned I’d befriended a man. What was I thinking?

I cleared my throat to hide my near slip and he offered me his waterskin. I had my own in my pack, a charmed one that had a small portal connected to the spring at home, but I took the one that he offered because it smelled like him. Beyond the scent of the forest and dried blood there was something almost herbal and sweet that made me think a little danger might be a lot of fun.

I only took a small sip before handing it back. He took a drink after me and a drop of water slid down his chin. My gaze followed its path along his

sharp jaw, down his bobbing throat, all the way down his broad chest, where I imagined tracing it with my tongue. I turned away but not before he noticed me staring and tossed me another breathtaking smile.

"You talk exceedingly proper," he said.

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"No," he paused, considering. "It gives the impression that Mundane isn't your preferred language."

"I suppose that is true. I'm not accustomed to speaking aloud. My speech is *exceedingly proper*—" I said in my most mocking tone, which felt very uncouth, but was worth it for the way it made him grin— "because I don't wish to be misunderstood."

He quirked a beautifully arched brow, bringing attention to the silver piercing through it. "How do you usually communicate?"

"Mind to mind, no," I corrected myself. "Heart to heart may be more accurate. It is like telepathy."

"Do all Elves speak that way?"

I bit my lip, trying to figure out how to fit the truth into the lie.

"All my sisters are capable of it," I said slowly. "But I am of the few who prefer it." Orina preferred it too, saying it was easier because of her constant migraines.

It wasn't only other Sanctian we spoke to this way, but all life in the Mysticwood. The fact that it didn't work with Vez set off little warning bells in my head, but I shoved that anxiety deep down inside me, into the box where all my stolen pain was stored.

"Why do you prefer it? Don't you wanna hear your perfect voice?" His teasing tone lacked any malice, but I didn't enjoy his jest.

"It is better that I am quiet."

"Why the hell is that?"

"It draws less attention to my imperfections," I muttered, looking away and wishing I'd made him walk on my other side. He had full vantage of my birthmark.

"You should curse," he said, after a while.

"What?"

"Say naughty things," he grinned. "No, scream them. Be loud. Take up space," he slid his fingers into mine and spun me in a circle. Surprised, I stumbled into him and he caught me, a large hand at my waist. He touched

me like it was the most natural thing in the world, like our mere proximity wasn't sinful.

I was ashamed of how much I enjoyed it. My heart was a hummingbird, fluttering wildly, drunk on the nectar of his words. "Stop watering yourself down. Anyone who can't handle you should drown."

His grin was broad and too warm not to match. He grabbed my other hand and spun me around like we were children.

"What are you doing?" I asked, running to keep up with him.

"You seem like the type to enjoy frolicking while cursing," he said. "Let's fuckin' frolic."

I couldn't stop the giggling spilling out of me. "Teach me your naughty words."

"ARE YOU TRAVELING?" he asked, wiping his mouth salaciously.

Or was I the salacious one? Dear Tree, men were dangerous. How could I entertain such impure thoughts mere days before getting my horn?

"Are you traveling?" I repeated his question back to him because getting flustered apparently made me a bumbling fool.

He didn't fault me for it, he hadn't said a thing about all the clumsy mistakes I'd made in front of him. He just kept grinning at me with the same endearing glimmer in his eyes.

"I asked you first." He reached out, toying with one of the locs hanging loose near my face. I swallowed thickly.

"I am searching for something," I relented.

"What lovely coincidence."

I quirked a brow. "You're searching for something as well?"

"What are you searching for?"

"I asked you first," I retorted, mirroring his words.

He smiled again. It was a treasure I wished he'd stop giving me so abundantly. How was I supposed to mistrust him when he kept looking at me like that?

"Something that would change my life," he said, a little solemnly.

"A coincidence indeed."

"We should travel together," he offered and my heart skipped a beat.

It was a terrible, awful, foolish idea. I loved it. I'd been so lonely the past few days wandering the Mysticwood on my own. The first week I

reveled in the independence and, rejoiced in the freedom from the judgey golden eyes of my sisters, before I began to miss them. I wouldn't go home without the Seed of Life, but oh how I missed having someone to share my joy with.

"I don't think that's a good idea," my voice lacked any sort of conviction.

"Why not? Maybe we're searching for the same thing." His eyes were hopeful but his mouth was tight like he hoped I hadn't noticed the desperation lining his tone.

"I doubt that."

Myrella always said men only came this deep into the Mysticwood for one thing. But maybe she was wrong. I wanted her to be wrong about a lot of things. The chittering sound off in the distance told me otherwise.

"Traveling in numbers is safer," he said as if he had heard it too.

My eyes widened. "How shameless," I admonished, but I wasn't able to hide the humor in my tone, the smile that shaped my words. "You mean to have me protect you?"

His head tilted back, roaring unabashedly with laughter. I watched in awe. My sisters would frown at such an unseemly sight. Laughter wasn't wrong but an excess in anything was unsightly, imperfect.

His laughter was radiant and I found myself entirely too disappointed when it was over.

"I can see how you would think that, litt—" his voice changed direction when he saw my brief scowl, "Iliyana, considering the predicament you found me in, but I can assure you I'm stronger than you think."

"Why did you do that?"

"What?"

"You were going to call me little again, but you refrained."

He quirked a brow at me. "You looked pissed when I called you little Elf. As sexy as the expression was on you, I think I'd rather you not make it at me."

I stared at him for Great Tree knows how long before I could properly gather my thoughts. There was no way he was of the same sort of beastly men that Myrella warned me of. Unless beasts were impossibly attractive, which seemed plausible, but would they also be so considerate?

"I like it better when you look at me like that," his voice had that low tone I could listen to for hours.

“Like what?”

He leaned in close, and though I knew I should’ve stepped away, I stilled. His breath tickled the shell of my ear and I shivered despite how hot it was.

“Like I’m a forbidden fruit you’re trying desperately not to taste.”

THREE

You shall never harm another.

—Fourth Commandment of The First Unicorn.

I DECIDED TO TRAVEL with him. It was a horrifically foolish thing to do and I wondered if stupidity and perfection could share the same home. I hoped they could because I wasn't ready to part ways with him just yet. Today was a day of firsts and I didn't want that to end.

I'd spent my entire life forcing myself into the box of Myrella's idea of perfection and in just a few hours with this man I'd realized it didn't fit. It was a terrible shame that something so blasphemous felt so natural.

The myth that breaking the commandments would keep me from receiving my horn was just that, a myth. The headaches I'd had all day told me my horn was well on its way and not even the most wicked of sins could stop it.

Perhaps I wouldn't be allowed entry back into the Garden but I wasn't going to worry about that right now. In three more suns I would hit my first century and receive my horn. I could spend this day and two more with him before we had to part ways. I would search for the Seed of Life in earnest after that.

There was still the matter of night—the necklace only disguised my appearance while the sun was up—but it was only late afternoon. I would cross that bridge when I got to it.

We'd walked Northeast for another hour before we came to a grove full of delicious-looking flowers. He told me to wait among the flowers while he went to get us food.

“That’s a fine idea,” I told him, so I'd feel like I was giving orders rather than taking them.

I’d been walking aimlessly and he’d been content to follow, though I’m not sure he realized my trek lacked direction; I did everything with confidence because it resembled perfection. Even if I didn’t feel the arrogance I tried to exude, one didn’t make it ninety-nine years with my sisters without learning to pretend.

When I left, Orina was the only one who was sad to see me go. She gave me a map and pointed out all the places to avoid and all the villages with beautiful women, not that I needed the last bit. Or the map at all—the Seed of Life would reveal itself to me once my horn came in—but her concern filled me with warmth. Myrella’s encouragement made me feel cold. I’d thought that Myrella would tell me not to go.

I’d held on to some silly hope that she would want me to stay until after my horncoming, that she would want to spend the sacred rite by my side and help me through it. That she didn’t mention it told me she harbored the same fear that it would be just as flawed as my hatching. In the end, her silence was far more encouraging of my departure than her words.

Be safe, and remember the commandments, Iliyana.

My thoughts hadn’t wandered to the map in my pack until Vez asked if I had one. His was too bloody to make out. He said we could come up with a plan together after we ate. Perhaps he had noticed my carefree roaming.

I sat on a fallen log with moss draped over it, wiggling my toes in the fluffy grass. The sensation was still so strange, human feet were entirely too sensitive. They felt everything and though sometimes that was pleasant, most of the time, it wasn’t. I was looking forward to my hooves returning upon nightfall.

Snacking on the surrounding wildflowers, I was thinking that Vez might not be able to carry back enough fruit for both of us when a twig snapped behind me.

My smile fell when I saw the dead hare in his hand. He displayed the tragedy proudly, its limp body swinging in his large hand. There was no blood, thank the Sacred Tree, but I could feel its death from where I sat—a hollowness in my gut worse than the weight of lies. All the flowers I’d eaten rushed up my throat. I tried to clamp a hand over it but it spewed through my fingers.

Vesper dropped the carcass and rushed to my side, gently placing a hand on my back. “Iliyana, what’s wrong?”

The worry heightening his voice was astounding. Had he not seen what he’d done?

“Why would you do that?” I rasped as I wiped the sick from my mouth.

His brows pinched. “What did I do?”

My eyes nearly bulged from my face and I swung a hand blindly toward the rabbit. He frowned, still not understanding. Had he found the creature’s life so insignificant that my distress was this surprising for him? His focus bounced from me to bunny and back again as his frown deepened and he finally looked sorry.

“Do you not like hare?”

“I love rabbits!” I raised my voice, flinching at the volume. “Not to eat,” I said quieter.

“Should I have gotten a bird or—”

“No!”

He canted his head to the side. “What do you eat?”

“Not flesh!”

He blinked a few times in surprise, a hand going over his mouth. “Iliyana, I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

We were silent for a few uncomfortable moments as I calmed myself. Vez wiped the moisture from my cheeks with regret pinching his expression.

“Should I eat something else?”

“No,” I shook my head. “Then his death would be in vain. You have to eat all of him.”

He frowned.

“Is that a problem?” My voice was sharp.

“I can’t really eat the hide.”

My mouth fell open.

“Or the bones,” he continued.

“How wasteful!”

“I can try.”

I got back on the log, crossing my arms over my chest. “Will it hurt you?”

He shrugged. “Probably not.”

“What parts have you no use of?”

“Hide, bones, and innards.”

Sighing, I closed my eyes and reached out. The area was teeming with life, and I tried not to pitch my voice too far; not everyone who heard me would be friendly.

I have the hide, innards, and bones of a hare for any who need it.

After a quick conversation with the surrounding creatures, I pointed to a boulder only half covered in moss at the opposite end of the grove.

“Place everything you cannot eat over there and it will be retrieved.”

“By who?”

“An owl for the innards and goblin child for the hide and bones.”

Vesper looked at me for a long while, his lips pursed like he was holding back questions. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to answer them. Could Elves speak to creatures telepathically? I didn’t want to feel the weight of a lie again. Would he even believe me if I did?

Instead he asked, “Will you be alright while I cook this?”

“You have to cook it? How vulgar!”

He chuckled as he retrieved the poor hare. “What do you eat, Iliyana?” he asked again.

I wanted to believe I imagined the emphasis on you, but the fact that he hadn’t asked what Elves eat hadn’t escaped me.

“I will be fine,” I answered his first question.

A smirk played at his lips, and my body warmed under his gaze, though it never strayed from my eyes.

“Alright,” he relented. “But try not to watch. I need to butcher it.” He turned his back to me and retrieved the large blade he had sheathed at his lower back.

He didn’t press the issue but that only made me feel worse. Those who didn’t ask too many questions always had something to hide. Myrella told me that.

A chill ran down my spine as her parting words came back to me.

There are things in the forest far more dangerous than man.

What could be more dangerous than something that wanted my blood?

Demons, she told me. *They disguise themselves as men, but they’re worse. Men will steal your life, but demons will steal your innocence.*

“What attacked you?” I asked again, watching the muscles in his back flex as his broad shoulders went rigid.

He turned just enough to give me his profile, his razor-sharp canines flashing in that smile that was more warning than friendly. “Do you really want to know?”

His aura shifted when he smiled like that, the energy around him so taut some might mistake it for menace. I saw it for what it was–fear. Was he afraid of what attacked him or was it the possibility I already knew the answer that made him nervous?

“No.”

He laughed, the tension leaving his shoulders just like that. “I adore your honesty.”

“I do not enjoy lies.”

He laid down his knife and when he turned to me, his hands were coated in blood. There were three neat piles of gore behind him: skin, flesh, and innards. Everything in my body screamed to run, to get far far away from him as he squatted in front of me. I held deathly still as he raised a crimson hand toward my face, stopping just before touching me.

“You’re so sweet, Iliyana,” he purred. “So *innocent*.”

I swallowed and he tracked the movement and I noticed it was the first time since we’d met that he looked anywhere but my face. The heat of his gaze seared my skin as it ventured down to my breasts, slowly down to my hips, all the way to my feet before coming back to my eyes. I forgot to breathe.

He licked his lips and when he smiled, I thought it was the worst one yet because it made me want in a way I never had before. A hunger swam in his eyes that I recognized because I felt it in the throbbing warmth between my legs.

A current of heat pulsed in my core and my skin screamed to touch him. I balled my hands into tight fists in my lap. He stood, giving me his back again.

“There was a creek about a mile from here,” he said. “I’m gonna go wash my hands.”

As much as I should’ve been grateful for the distance he put between us, his absence left me cold.

FOUR

Unicorns are the embodiment of virtue. Demons are the embodiment of sin. They must NEVER be together.

—Fifth Commandment of The First Unicorn

VEZ WAS GIVING ME THE opportunity to run. I told myself I wasn't a fool because I realized that, but proved myself wrong by staying.

The owl and goblin child had come and gone and yet here I remained. I even asked the goblin child how rabbits were cooked and she prepared a small fire and spit roast in exchange for the hide and bones. The scent of it made me lose the rest of the petals in my stomach, and it was humiliating having a goblin look upon me with pity.

"Why you want it cooked if you can't even stomach smell?" she asked me, her raspy voice surprisingly soft.

I shot her a look I hadn't known I could produce and her pity morphed into fear. I immediately regretted it, but apologizing would've been admitting to yet another mistake, so I didn't.

It's not for me.

The bones tied to the ends of her hair jingled as she tilted her head in question. "For demon you travel with?"

My brows pulled together and she rolled her eyes as she turned the gore on the spit. "Unicorns are gods of Mysticwood. Eyes are always watching God," she said.

He's not a demon.

She laughed, a shrill little cackle that revealed needle sharp teeth. “It’s still a lie even if it’s only yourself you fool.”

VEZ WAS SURPRISED when he returned shortly before sunset and I was still here. His shock faded, joy replacing it when he saw the rabbit. I was ashamed by how much I wanted to return his smile.

“You cooked for me?” he asked.

“A goblin did,” I corrected him. My gaze caught on the bouquet of marigolds in his hand. They looked delicious, sun-ripened and sweet as raisins. “You brought me flowers.”

He smiled but it was a new one, it was...bashful. My stupid heart swelled at the idea that he had more smiles for me to discover. He extended them to me, his other hand gripping the back of his neck as he avoided eye contact.

“I thought you might be hungry.”

I took them eagerly, a grin dimpling my cheeks. His eyes glittered.

“You stayed,” he said.

I shouldn’t have. It was the perfect opportunity for us to part ways, but I was beginning to wonder how important Myrella’s idea of perfection was to me. She wouldn’t have approved of any of my lovely firsts today but I wasn’t ready to look at that. I wasn’t ready to acknowledge the fact that not only did I break our most sacred rule, but that I did it to save a demon.

I brought the flowers to my face, inhaling them as I prayed to the Great Tree that there was such a thing as a kind demon. “You expected me to, did you not?”

“I hoped.”

A foolish swarm of butterflies erupted in my gut. His words shouldn’t have excited me like they did. I returned to my mossy stump, facing away from him as I ate my flowers from the stem up. He took a seat on the old log that had broken away from my stump. It was impossible to ignore the glee dripping from him like sap, sweet and sticky.

“What,” I finally snapped, but the word was all rounded at the edges, lacking any bite.

“I never thought the first time I gave a woman flowers, I’d get to watch her eat them.”

I turned away from him, my chewing awkward from the joy forcing my lips to curl. The knowledge that I had created a first for him too took flight in my chest. “You are very welcome.”

Laughter rumbled from him like boulders down a waterfall. “Why do you eat the stem first?”

“I am saving the best for last,” I said as if it were obvious.

Vesper joined me on the log, sitting close enough that our thighs brushed. The little contact made my stomach fold in on itself in excitement. “Let me try one.”

I handed him a flower and he popped the entire bloom in his mouth, returning the stem to me. After a bit of vigorous chewing, he seemed to force it down. “I can’t see what you’re getting out of that.”

“Because you’re doing it wrong,” I admonished.

“Eating? You’re telling me I don’t know how to eat?”

“You clearly don’t,” I teased.

He twirled one of my locs around his finger. “I could show you.”

“Haven’t you already?”

He quirked a brow, a challenge in his expression that made me realize we weren’t talking about flowers anymore. I had Orina and her obsession with mortal women to thank for my little knowledge of the subject. My cheeks warmed and he cupped my jaw, running his thumb along my lips before I could respond.

“You’re hard to look away from when you blush like that.”

“Then don’t,” I whispered.

He leaned in close and my breath hitched. A simple tilt of my head was all it would take for our lips to meet. But I stilled, too afraid to make the first damning move. Because damn us it would. I knew what he was, knew that his mere proximity was sin like no other, knew that every decision I made that brought me closer to him pulled me further from the perfection I’d strived for.

Despite all of that there was an undeniable pull between us that neither of us seemed capable of turning away from. We seemed frozen in that moment for an eternity that ended far too soon. He swiped his thumb along my lip again, pulling it free from where I’d captured it in my teeth. The longing in his eyes was palpable, tying my stomach in tight little knots.

“When night falls,” said Vez, his voice a pained whisper, “don’t look at me.”

“Why not?” I asked because I wanted to know how much he was willing to reveal.

He dropped his hand, letting his fingers trace lightly down my neck and making me shiver. His gaze was downcast as he scooted away like putting space between us pained him. “Because you might not like what you see.”

Clutching my necklace, I squeezed the jewel to keep myself from reaching for him.

“Can you see in the dark?” I asked just as the sun said its goodbyes, the bruised sky matching his violet eyes.

“I can.”

“Then don’t look at me either.”

He gave me one of his dazzling smiles, his brow quirked as he said: “Deal.”

When the night crept in, we stayed on opposite sides of the same log, which acted as a partition, the dead wood large enough that we couldn’t see each other while lying down. The canopy above the grove was all twisted up like the trees couldn’t stand not touching each other, their branches woven like webs. Only a few stars sparkled through and I couldn’t stop thinking about his eyes.

I turned the crystal on my necklace over, spinning it between my fingers, the delicate chain making a sound so soft it could barely be heard over the chirping of crickets and the croaking of toads.

“Can’t sleep?” he asked softly.

“I could ask you the same.”

He let out a little breath that sounded something like a laugh. “Shall I sing for you?”

“So that you may attack me in my sleep?”

“If you thought I was going to do that, then why did you stay?”

Because as foolish as it was, I wanted to believe that in leaving the Garden I stepped into one of Orina’s stories. That demon or not, Vesper was like the knight—brave, valiant, and kind. And part of me hoped that it was the will of the Sacred Tree that brought us together.

“I want to believe that you won’t.”

“So innocent,” he admonished.

“You say it like it’s a bad thing.”

“Not bad,” he paused, and I imagined his tongue running across his lips. “But very tempting.”

I stilled, and he laughed as if he heard it.

"I won't touch you while the moon is out," he said. "I promise."

"Does your promise hold any weight?"

"Clever girl." I could hear the smile curling around his words. "It does for you. I'll make myself worthy of the trust you've given me." The grass rustled and I wondered if he was turning away from me or toward me. "Get some sleep, Iliyana."

VEZ VISITED ME IN MY dreams. My dream began as pleasant as it always did, in a place where the sun shone like happiness and the flowers held me like a hug. The trees were towering pink crystals with fluffy clouds for foliage that rained down little blue flower petals, and pearlescent fish swam through the droplets.

"This is the first time I was invited into a dream and not greeted by a bed."

"Who said you were invited?"

His grin showed off his sharp canines. "Don't play me for a fool, Iliyana. I can feel your emotion like it's my own while I'm in here."

I turned away, willing myself not to blush. I didn't usually have dominion over my dreams, but it seemed I did tonight.

"Why would I waste my dreamscape sleeping?"

He let out a soft laugh as he ran his hand down a tree of rose quartz. Petals landed in his braided hair, fell off his broad shoulders. "Beds are for more than sleeping, Iliyana."

"I see no reason a flower cannot be a bed."

He finally turned to me. I was sitting atop a massive bloom, my hooves dangling from violet petals. His eyes caught on them first, then slowly slid up to meet mine.

"I suppose you're right," he smiled.

I hopped down as he came toward me, his twilight eyes alight with desire.

"Bed or not, my dreams always turn into nightmares."

"That won't happen with me here," he said, and I smiled. Perhaps he was my knight afterall. "Dreams with me all end the same, regardless of how they start."

“How’s that?” I didn’t need to move to close the space between us, the distance disappeared with a mere thought.

“It’ll be easier to show you.”

He hooked a finger into the fabric of my dress, his fingertip brushing my sternum where the low cut ended. I shivered at the contact, arching toward him as he tugged at it.

My dress morphed into a string of pearls, rolling off me like beads of water. He wet his lips, and I made no move to cover myself, emboldened by the dreamscape. His smile was feral, but he kept his eyes on mine.

“I wouldn’t have known you noticed my dress at all,” I said, raising my chin. “You never look away from my face.”

He put his hands on my hips, gripping the soft flesh there just short of bruising, pulling me so close that every breath brushed my nipples against his chest.

“I’m afraid if I look anywhere else, I won’t be able to resist bending you over and fucking you against a tree.”

My chest rose and fell rapidly, my thighs clenching together.

“Does that excite you, Iliyana?” he threaded his fingers through my locs, gripping tightly and baring my neck to him. “Are you imagining how good I’d feel inside you?” His tongue was hot and wet as it slid up my throat. He bit my ear, agonizingly slow in his ministrations. “How deep would you let me go? How hard would you let me fuck you?”

I squirmed under his touch, lewd sounds escaping my lips as he tasted my skin. Pleasure built until the apex of my thighs throbbed painfully with a desire that felt as right as it did wrong.

“Please,” I begged.

“Please, what, Iliyana?” his voice was as hot and silken as his tongue on my neck.

“*Please*,” I repeated.

“Tell me what you want, beautiful.” He licked the column of my throat, scraped sharp teeth over my skin, and kissed me down my chest.

What did I want, other than his ministrations to be never-ending? What was I asking him for, aside from everything and all it entailed? Before I could work it out, the dream ripped itself from my grasp. I awoke with my heart pounding, my skin feverish, and my body aching for my own damnation.

I COULDN'T LOOK AT him without blushing. The easy smile he wore each time our eyes met made me think he knew exactly how lecherous my thoughts were. It was so unlike me; I'd never craved more than a hug, a simple intimacy just to know my presence was valued. That hardly seemed enough now, and I had no idea what to do about it.

Nothing. There was nothing to be done because I couldn't give in to such things. I was perfect. I was chaste.

I tried to avoid looking at him but I was trying so hard that it was just as obvious as if I'd been staring at him. If that was the case, I figured I should just relent to simple desires. Looking wasn't impure.

His body was a work of art I wanted to admire for hours. It didn't help that we'd come to the creek to wash up. Or perhaps it did. He was even more attractive with the noonday sun gilding him, water dripping from his oaken skin. I wet my lips, wishing I could lick it from his chest and blushing at the thought.

He'd been the perfect gentleman while I washed, foraging for fruits, nuts, and a bouquet of delicious flowers. I was at the pond's edge when he returned, watching my reflection in the still waters. I'd intended to touch up my facepaint, a golden starburst around the spot where my horn would come in, rays crossing over both my eyes and ending on the sides of my cheeks.

Disappointment stared back at me as I brought a hand to the birthmark that still marred my right eye.

"What's wrong?" Vez knelt beside me, meeting my eyes in the water's reflection.

"I thought," I bit my lip, knowing the words trying to leave me were senseless. Sighing, I continued anyway. "I hoped maybe it was gone."

A tiny V formed between his eyes, a sympathetic kind of confusion I tried not to let humiliate me. My face heated anyway and I wrapped my arms around myself to resist the urge to cover it.

My gaze downcast, a few locs fell over my shoulder in an auburn curtain. Vesper brushed them back, and I flinched at the touch before relaxing as he twirled one around his finger. "Why would you think that?" he asked softly.

“Because you look at me how I wish to see me,” I whispered, turning to him. “You look at me as though I am perfect.”

“Your imperfections are what make you beautiful, Iliyana.” He cupped my cheek, his thumb running along the mark. “This is beautiful because it’s a part of you.”

The utter longing in his expression stole my breath and I’d never wanted to see myself through someone else's eyes more than I did in that moment.

He leaned in and my mind went straight to my illicit dream and I expected to feel the wet slide of his tongue. Instead, he pressed a gentle kiss right on the spot my horn would soon be. My lungs emptied in a rush, the sound almost lewd. Heat bloomed so rapidly beneath my cheeks that my eyes watered.

I’d never been kissed there before. I’d never even *thought* about being kissed there before. I wasn’t sure I was supposed to like it but Great fucking Tree, I loved it. I wanted more.

I didn’t know what to do with myself. I was too hot. My dress was still wet. My face was burning. I brought the back of my hand to my mouth, too flustered for logical thought. Vez looked like he might have been trying to hold back laughter.

“Are you alright?” he was biting his lip, his cheeks puffing as he struggled to maintain his composure. He looked like a bubble ready to burst.

“I am too wet,” I blurted before I could think better of it. That was the needle; his bubble popped. Vez nearly fell into the water from laughing so hard.

I kicked him, knocking him into the river before I went to lie in the sun and calm myself.

A pair of winged deer approached timidly from my right, shooting nervous glances between me and Vez. I told them they were safe and their feathers stopped trembling. They trotted to the water, and I watched as they drank their fill, grateful for their calming presence. My body heat had returned to a comfortable level by the time they left.

The morning sun embraced me like the hug that no longer seemed enough, drying me as I sat with my knees pulled up to my breasts. It didn’t take me long to dry. My dress was little more than a shift; low cut and backless–it covered my modesty and little more, with delicate chains over

my wide hips to keep the slit up the sides from revealing my rear. The color was a pale gold that ate up the light hitting it and gave off a pearlescent sheen meant to mimic the coat of a unicorn.

Vez paid it no mind, he'd only given my body that one lingering glance last night and has since then kept his eyes on my face. I hated that I wanted him to look at me the way I leered at him.

I was jealous of the water sluicing between each muscle of his core. I wanted to run my fingers down the dark hair that disappeared beneath his waistband. The fantasy of removing his belt with my teeth played in my mind for the hundredth time and I had to take a moment to steady my breathing.

"I love the way you're looking at me," he said as he left the waist-deep water.

"Good," I said, perhaps a little too sharply. "Trying to pretend I'm uninterested in admiring you is exhausting. It makes me feel awkward and I feel enough of that around you as it is."

He rewarded me with his boisterous laugh as he approached. The deeper his laugh, the more his stomach muscles clenched. My mind conjured half a dozen other things I could do to make them tighten like that and I cursed Orina for the imagination all her stories had given me.

"Are you always so honest?"

"I've never told a lie."

"Never?" Amusement lined his voice and I hoped I wouldn't regret the admission.

"Lying is wrong and I am perfection incarnate," I slowly pulled my gaze back up to his as he approached. The boulder I sat upon was high enough to put us at eye level. "But I'm only this candid when I use my physical voice."

He gave me a puzzled look but I didn't offer an explanation. He did me the favor of not asking. I told myself he was doing me a kindness, not forcing me to lie. Then he asked me a question that turned me red head to toe, my skin flushing with a warmth far greater than the sun.

"Are you a virgin, Iliyana?"

I wasn't ashamed of my chastity, I was quite proud. It was a sign of my perfection, unicorns were meant to be pure as midwinter snow, but the question made me think of the dream. My stomach tumbled as the thought of his tongue made me want to throw my chastity to the wayside.

“I may be overly honest but you are absurdly blunt,” my words came out breathy, lacking the bite I’d intended.

He came closer, twirling one of my red-brown locs in his fingers.

“You blush like one,” his wicked grin made my chest tighten, my heart fluttering delightedly.

“I should hope so,” my voice was thin. “Sanct—Elves refrain from all acts of lust.”

His brows rose to his hairline. “For how long?”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

His eyes widened. “Forever?”

“Of course.”

“You don’t even kiss?” I tried not to hear the disappointment in his voice.

“We kiss all the time, but it isn’t lustful. It is how we heal.”

“Show me.”

“You’re uninju—

Before I could get the words out, Vez pulled the blade from behind his back and dragged it viciously across his palm. My breath caught at the sight, the gore making me queasy.

“Why would you do that?” I fussed at him as I hopped from the boulder to grab his hand and staunch the flow of blood.

The hot liquid rushing through my fingers made my stomach clench violently, and I had to swallow down the bile threatening to surface before I brought my lips to his.

I rose to the tips of my toes, but he still had to lean down for me to reach him. His mouth was criminally soft and just like the first time, a swarm of butterflies erupted low in my belly. A sharp pain bloomed across my palm as I absorbed his injury, but it was nothing compared to the pain of his previous wounds. I pulled away when the sensation subsided, and the look on his face puzzled me. A small smirk appeared as he stared down at me.

“That’s not a kiss,” he said, his words buttery smooth.

“It is so,” I said indignantly.

His smirk grew, and the butterflies raged in my belly. “That’s not how *I* kiss.”

“Show me,” the words were out of my mouth before I could think better of it. I wanted to take them back—no, that’s a lie. I wish I didn’t mean them

half as much as I did. But I'd already touched him, the rule had been broken, so what if I shattered it?

"You're sure?" his smirk was gone, and the new intensity in his violet eyes set the butterflies aflame.

No.

"Yes."

He put a hand low on my back and gently destroyed the space between us. He caressed my cheek with a tenderness I didn't know he was capable of and my eyes watered. This was a mistake. A terrible, awful mistake. He hadn't even used his lips yet, and I was already coming undone.

His eyes seemed to lay me bare as he came close enough to share breath. Each movement was so slow and deliberate, and the fire in my belly exploded, liquid heat pooling between my thighs. Vez tipped my chin as he brushed his lips over mine, his other hand falling to my backside and gripping me in a way that made me whimper.

Then he kissed me. And he was right. It wasn't the same; it was nothing like healing him. The dream I had didn't even hold up to it. My magic poured into him but he had no pain to give me, only a bittersweet longing that I wished to drink on for eternity.

It was all at once so much more than I'd ever had and entirely not enough. It was newness in an impossible way. He was teaching me a new language, speaking to me of intimacy and passion in a way I yearned to understand.

The fire he'd erupted in me continued to grow as my body melted into his. My hands grew a mind of their own, traveling the expanse of his chest, stroking the nape of his neck, tracing the line of his jaw. His tongue flicked across my bottom lip as I sucked in a sharp breath.

He might have mistaken the sound for fear because he nearly pulled away, but I shocked myself, grabbing his face and halting his retreat. I felt him smile against me and I wanted to devour it. I needed to consume his joy and replace it with the same hungry beast he'd awoken in me.

I tried to move my mouth against his in the same language he'd just taught me, but I stuttered; my lips clumsy and trembling, speaking of innocence and excitement. But I was nothing if not a fast learner, and within a few moments I'd picked up the slow and sensual conversation we'd left off on.

Vez groaned when I swiped my tongue along his bottom lip. I thought that meant he liked it, but he pulled away, his hands on my shoulders, holding me firmly in place as he took a step back. My body felt cold everywhere he no longer touched me.

"Did I do it wrong?"

His brows pinched a bit before he laughed. "No. You did it very right."

"Then why—

"If we go any further, I'm going to be tempted to teach you a lot more," he said, with a pointed look downward.

I followed his gaze to a large bulge in his pants. I nearly asked him what was wrong with his leg but I remembered men had extra parts.

"Oh," I said, breathlessly, pulling my gaze back to his. *Oh.* My teeth scraped against my bottom lip while I tried not to stare at his mouth. For a moment, I thought I saw a hint of red beneath his deep brown cheeks.

Vez pulled me against him, wrapping his arms around me in a tight hug. "I can't handle your gaze right now," he whispered into my locs.

FIVE

The Mysticwood will always provide for you.

—Sanctian Codex

THERE WERE A PLETHORA of glades within the Mysticwood, as if the forest was one massive castle with too many guest rooms. The one we slept in that night was littered with boulders of amethyst dusted with moss. Berry bushes dotted the treeline, and vines full of moonblooms hung from the branches like garlands. Winged deer and jackalopes grazed as the sun set, and the sky through the canopy took the same hue as Vez's eyes.

Vez and I sat together, back to back, in a fluffy patch of grass. I had a vine full of moonblooms to eat, and we shared a pile of nuts and melonberries. A winged doe curled up next to me, making a point not to touch Vez, and fell asleep as I stroked its silken feathers.

"Will you tell me what you're looking for?" he asked. His deep voice thrummed through my back as he spoke. It was the most modest of touches, but his bare skin on mine made my stomach flutter nonetheless.

"You first," I tipped my head back, resting it on his shoulder as I popped a silvery-white flower into my mouth. How long were we going to dance around the truth? He may have still thought me an Elf, but he had to be aware that I no longer thought him human.

"I'm searching for something to make me normal."

"You look normal to me." My opinion on the matter was moot, considering I'd never seen a human before, but that was beside the point. I still found it difficult to believe a demon could be so utterly captivating, but I suppose that's where the temptation came in.

Vez turned just enough that his cheek brushed mine, whisper-soft. Our lips would brush if I turned my head, but I held still, facing the sky as the first of the stars twinkled to life. “Have you ever met a human before, Iliyana?”

My mouth curled at the corners, a breath of a laugh. “I thought you were the first.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

“I’m not.”

“Hm?”

“You’re not disappointing Vez, you are...” I paused, searching for the word that would encompass all I’d felt since I met him. A plethora of emotions rushed forward, but I wasn’t prepared for the vulnerability that would come with sharing it all so I settled. “Exhilarating.”

My heart fluttered like hummingbirds were trapped in my ribcage when I felt his smile against my face.

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” I agreed, pressing petals to my lips as I tried to contain my glee. “And beautiful. Very beautiful.”

He pressed a finger to my cheek, turning me away from him. “You won’t think that if you keep trying to peek at me after the moon’s risen.”

I could feel him transforming between us, his shoulder blades pushing me away to make room for whatever grew from his back. They weren’t enough to diminish his beauty, I found Vesper gorgeous with my eyes closed.

But if I objected, he had every right to demand to see me as well. I leaned forward, wrapping my hands around my hooves, resting my head against my furry knees. My skin was cold without him against me. I hoped he would close the space I put between us. He didn’t.

It was for the best that he didn’t. The truth of that shouldn’t have bothered me like it did.

Then his tail brushed against mine, smooth where mine was velvety, pointed where mine was fluffy. Quick. Tentative. Testing? My foolish heart did a flip.

I mimicked his movement, brushing my tail against his, keeping the contact just a moment longer than he did. But still quick. Tentative. Testing and retreating.

He wrapped his tail around mine. The hummingbirds in my chest erupted, feathers flitting low in my gut.

“Shall I sing you to sleep tonight?”

“Tell me a story instead.”

“Alright,” I could hear the smile in his voice. He gave no indication it would be a sad story. “Once upon a time...”

THERE WAS A GIRL with a very rich father. He cut no expense at spoiling his wife and daughter, he cherished them with his coin every chance he got. It was wonderful but it was empty. No matter how many coats he bought his daughter, she was always cold. No matter the extravagant meals, she was always starving for something he could never give.

The little girl’s mother shared the sentiment and so she found a man who kept her both warm and full. When the father found his wife warm and wet and full of another man's cock, he killed them both.

The little girl had been hiding in her parents’ wardrobe at the time, hoping to surprise them. When the raunchy sounds and contented sighs morphed into screams and violent banging, the girl opened the doors of the wardrobe, peeking through the crack. She’d never felt warmth like that of her mother’s blood splattered across her face.

Soon after, the father remarried. A terribly ugly woman with terribly ugly daughters. Not ugly of the visage, but of the heart. The three women were as beautiful as every man’s dream and the father spent time in all their beds but none knew other than the little girl.

She was jealous of all the extra attention her sisters received and thought to tell them her father loved none of them because he was using all of them. This made the stepsisters furious.

They stripped the little girl of all that she had, even her name and her status, dubbing her Cinder the kitchen wench. From then on, Cinder was made to launder all the clothes, prepare all the meals, and clean all the mansions’ hearths while still burning. The ash blackened the threadbare rags she’d been given as clothes. Embers singed her skin, covering her in angry red welts and leaking blisters.

Each night, after everyone was asleep, Cinder would go out and find a bunny. She’d cut the hare from ass to gullet, letting its blood run over her while she prayed to be swept away by a charming prince.

One day, a demoness answered her call. A gorgeous demoness with the wings of a bat, two black horns, and a long, pointed tail. A succubus.

"What is it you wish for, dear Cinder?" the demoness asked.

"I want to be beautiful enough to be loved like my stepsisters are," she said.

The demoness smiled, teeth sharp as needles. "It is done," she said. "At the cost of your firstborn son."

And so Cinder grew into a seductress finer than her stepmother and stepsisters combined. When a handsome young prince impregnated her, she gave birth to a beautiful little boy with the wings of a bat, two black horns, and a long, sharp tail.

The beautiful boy had a gruesome beginning. His horns rent his mother in two on the way out, his birth inviting her death. The succubus came for the boy, smiling at the beautiful gore of it all as she swaddled her payment.

Demons run free in this land, and though there are hunters, none go after sex demons. The succubus took the baby boy to her brothel, raising him there with dozens of other succubi whom he calls his sisters.

His sisters are kind and loving; they coddle the boy and he wants for nothing. As he gets older and starts looking more man than boy, their cuddles last longer, their kisses linger. They began teaching him how to work.

At fourteen, they teach him anatomy; where to touch to make a man beg, how to lick to make a woman cry out. At fifteen, he served his first customer. At eighteen, he understands why his mother was so cold. In his twenties, he goes numb, and in his thirties, he forgets how to smile.

One day, he gets a strange customer who tells him he tastes like sorrow.

"Have ye ever been to the Mysticwood, young man?"

"I've never left these walls," he answers.

"It can change your life," she tells him. "You can become human."

"How?"

"Go to the heart of the forest and slay a unicorn. Its blood will wash you clean of sin, bathe in it and you will be reborn as a human."

VEZ CAME TO MY DREAMS again. He found me weeping atop a cloud, my sorrow raining into a pond of stars. I hadn't bothered with clothes this

time, and if Vez noticed that only my locs covered my breasts, he didn't show it. He smiled softly as he wiped my tears.

"Don't be sad," he whispered. "I won't–"

"I'm not sad," I interrupted. "I am angry."

"Why?"

"Because you are good. You're kind. You deserved better. You deserve tenderness and warmth and—" I stopped myself before I could go too far. Before I offered him my heart. Kind or not, he was a demon, and I was a Sanctian. If I were snow, then he was ash, and we couldn't be together without turning into filth.

But the thought that the relationship budding between us was sinful only enraged me further. He deserved better, and commandments of The First be damned, I wanted to be the one to give it to him.

"And you don't?" he asked.

"What?"

"You're everything you say I am and so much more." His knuckles brushed against my cheek, and he let his hand fall, resting above my heart. "But you have the same hollowness in you that I do. You crave all the same things."

"How would you know that?"

He toyed with my hair, the practiced motion absentminded. "I told you before, Iliyana. When I'm invited into dreams, I can feel the heart of the dreamer like it's my own."

"But I never invited you."

"Didn't you, though?" he questioned. "When you decided to stay, you did it knowing what I am."

"I knew you were a demon," I relented, finally. "But not what kind."

"Did it matter?"

"No," I leaned into his touch. "I only hoped that you were a kind demon."

He pulled me to his chest and wrapped his arms around my waist. Our bodies melded together in the bed of clouds. "Your hope was more than I deserved."

"It is not enough."

He pressed a soft kiss to the growing knot on my forehead and I sighed contentedly, moths flitting around the fire growing in my belly at his every touch.

“It is for me,” he said, holding me close, so close I couldn’t tell where he ended and I began. We became one with the clouds, one with each other, our hearts beating in tandem. In the dreamscape, we weren’t demon and unicorn—he had no customers to service and I had no sisters to impress—we were simply Vesper and Iliyana. Nothing more and nothing less.

I wished it never had to end.

SIX

Chitterfang are guardians of the unicorns who aren't allowed to commit violence.

—Sanctian Codex

"WHY DO YOU FEEL LIKE you need to be perfect?" Vez startled me with the question.

He'd looked at my map and asked where we were. I pointed to a place that was miles away from us. We had been quietly heading in the opposite direction from where I assumed his goal was. Quiet aside from the occasional chittering sound I was sure we were both ignoring. A dozen spindly legs knocking together, bare bone clacking not far behind us.

The question yanked me from my thoughts and it took me a moment to find an answer. I once thought I needed perfection to attain my horn but it didn't take me long to realize that none of my sisters met the standard of perfection they spoke so highly of. I just wanted them to think me worthy but no matter how hard I tried to exceed their standards, the way they perceived me never changed.

A butterfly flitted by and I raised a finger for it to land on, admiring its pink and lavender wings rather than face Vez. "I want my sisters to look at me with something other than pity or contempt in their gaze."

I could feel his eyes on me, soft and imploring. "So why not try being imperfect instead?" he asked.

"What?"

"They can't pity you if they're too busy being pissed off at you."

My feet stilled. I stared at him incredulously, my mouth agape for what seemed like forever before I erupted with laughter. It came out as a giggle, building in intensity until I was clenching my stomach, doubled over as my

glee spilled out of me. It felt so good, I forgot to care about how unsightly it was.

"You speak nonsense as if it is the most natural course of action," I said lightly, swiping away the moisture and opals from my cheeks. "But I am ashamed to admit the thought never crossed my mind."

When I'd finally composed myself, I found Vez giving me that smile that stole my breath, the one with the starlight twinkling in his violet eyes. Our bodies seemed to draw near of their own accord, blooms reaching for the sun.

He brushed his knuckles down my cheek, a caress so gentle I could've mistaken it for a breeze. "It's not nonsense if it makes you smile like that."

My words came out breathy. "You are a hypocrite."

"How's that?" he ran his thumb along my bottom lip, freeing it from my teeth.

His expression was one of veneration and yearning wrapped up in a desire so thick I could taste it on my tongue, sweet as pomegranate. "Admonishing me for the way that I look at you when you look at me like this."

His answering grin was one of pure sin and I enjoyed it far more than I should have. "How am I looking at you, Iliyana?"

"I think you're well aware."

"I wanna hear you say it," he demanded.

"Like you want me. All of me."

His hand fell from my face, trailing down my arm before he slipped his fingers into mine. I closed the distance between us, my hand coming up to rest on his chest. His heart thundered against my palm, his skin so delightfully warm against mine.

He tilted his head to kiss me and I realized too late that we'd stopped for too long. The chittering sound rattled my ears. Vez pushed me with enough force that I fell into a tree, my breath forced from my lungs. He jumped back just as the Chitterfang dove between us.

Vez backed away, pulling his dagger. The Chitterfang was an old one, twice as large as a basilisk. It coiled its serpentine body around the tree I leaned against, careful not to step on me with its sharp, spider-like legs.

"Get away from her," Vez bellowed, his roar as mighty as the beast he faced.

But his hands were trembling. I realized for the first time how wrong his elegant fingers looked wrapped around the hilt of a blade. His hands were uncalloused, his skin as soft as my own, and his every touch was as gentle as a whisper. He may have boasted of strength, but what good was it if he was no more a fighter than I was?

Still, he stood his ground. He was no knight but he meant to protect me nonetheless. The Chitterfang would never harm me as the terrifying creatures were usually docile. They only left their dens when they sensed a threat, when men came too close to our Garden of Eden. If unicorns were the Gods of the Mysticwood then Chitterfangs were the warriors that protected the Gods.

"It's the same beast that attacked me before!" he warned.

Leave him be, I commanded. *He means me no harm.*

Liesssss. Demon wantsss blood of pure ones. Mussst protect.

The Chitterfang rose to its full height, clacking its bone legs all the way. Towering over Vez, it hissed, its split tongue tasting the air near his face. He swung his blade wildly, barely avoiding the snap of the Chitterfang's long teeth.

I said, Leave. Him. Be.

Mussst protect pure one.

It jabbed its long legs at Vez like spears. He was able to dodge the first strike but the second pierced him in the shoulder, another tore open his bicep. The scent of blood, *his blood,* filled the air and my breakfast threatened to reappear.

Stop!

Mussst protect.

Vez swung out again, breaking his blade on one of the Chitterfang's legs. It flicked the end of its tail like a whip, flinging Vez like a ragdoll. His back smacked a tree and a loud crack pierced the air that I hoped was the bark.

Vez pushed himself to his feet, still holding his broken blade. Blood spurted from his lips and my heart dropped into my gut.

"Run," he rasped.

The Chitterfang clattered toward Vez, legs moving in a wave one after the other on both sides.

"Iliyana, run!"

And I did, but not the way he'd wanted. I hopped on the Chitterfang's back.

I don't need your protection.

The Chitterfang's scales were cool beneath my lips. When the well of my magic began to pour, I reached deep inside myself searching for all the pain I'd stored. I reached all the way back to the tingling pain of the first plant I ever healed, the first bruise, the first cut, the first broken bone, and all the ones afterward. I pulled all the agony I carried forward, stifling my cries as the memories flooded me anew, and forced it all into the Chitterfang.

It scales warmed beneath my grasp. Not the gentle loving warmth but the kind of heat that sears, burns, and melts—my magic breaking instead of mending. The Chitterfang shrieked, the sound like knives on glass. My skin broke out in gooseflesh, the cries rending a piece of my soul. It bucked and writhed beneath me but I held on, keeping my lips pressed against it while I forced my magic to kill it from the inside out.

I held tight until the end. It was the least I could do.

When finally, it collapsed beneath me, I screamed. Opals burst from my eyes like a broken dam, a rush of sorrow that I choked on as I wailed. I cried for the Chitterfang and all the pain I forced upon it, I cried for its life and its death. I cried for taint on my soul.

At some point, there was movement—Vez was carrying me. I only noticed by Vesper's scent, fresh like rain and pine, wrapped up in the stench of blood. He apologized over and over as he carried me away from the corpse I created. Tears fell anew because even if it was partially his fault, I made every choice that had led me down this path. As terrible as it was, I wished he'd thank me instead.

EXHAUSTION PULLED ME in and out of consciousness, trees filtering in and out of my vision. I woke up just as I did the first time I'd saved him, cradled against his chest.

A mineral scent filled my senses as I woke, a steady dripping sound echoing in the distance. There was no breeze, but the air was cool and wet, and I was sure we were in a cave before my eyes opened. Green-blue moths flitted around each other, their luminescent wings lighting the cave.

His back was against the wall and he held me upright in his lap, my head resting on his shoulder as he ran his fingers through my locs.

"I thought your kiss healed," he said.

I sat up, the memory of what I'd done washing over me in cold dread. I hated myself for what I'd done, but worse, that I didn't regret it, because when I looked in his eyes, all I could feel was relief.

I took his face in my hands, proving it to my racing heart—he was here, he was whole. Running a thumb along his bottom lip, I leaned in. He stopped me with a finger to my mouth.

"I wasn't asking to be healed. It looks worse than it is, I'll be—"

"I wasn't trying to heal you," I interrupted him.

"Oh," the corner of his mouth quirked but his smile fled before it fully formed. He turned away before my lips met his.

"Vesper," I said, not hiding my irritation.

He chewed his lip, not saying anything, which only further irritated me because he *always* had something to say.

I slammed my hands into the cave wall behind his head, caging him in. The sound it made was deafening, my strength surprising him. Unicorns were meant to be pure and folk seemed to confuse that with delicate.

"Vesper," I repeated, my voice a low threat.

"Yes?"

"Are you turning away from me because you do not want to kiss me?" I didn't think that was the case but after all he'd been through, I had to make sure.

"No," he sighed, still not facing me. His eyes were far away, as if he were trying to resign himself to something.

"Then why?"

"How could you still want me after what you've done because of me?" He finally faced me, his features stricken. His guilt was infuriating. I didn't *want* guilt. I wanted him to choose me like I'd chosen him, consequences be damned.

"I've never wanted anything the way I want you."

"I'm no good—

I grabbed his jaw, clamping a hand over his mouth before he could finish the sentence.

"Do not try to save me from yourself, Vesper. Haven't you realized I'm the knight in this situation?" I ran my thumb along his bottom lip, my voice

softening. “Stop talking and be my prince.”

Straddling his lap, I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him as deeply as I could while I held my magic back. Of course I would heal him, but not until the pleasure outweighed the pain.

He tasted like blood and sweat and life. It should have made me sick, but I ran my tongue over his lips, searching for more of it, more of him. He opened for me and I tangled my tongue with his. He tasted like every bad decision I’d made since I met him, like pure sin and forbidden fruit.

I hated how much I craved it.

He hardened beneath me and a soft moan left me as my body responded to his. My hips rocked and my back arched. His hands ran up my thighs and settled on my hips. He guided me slowly along the length of him, his pants in the way of the connection I wanted.

Heat erupted in my gut, a swarm of burning butterflies fluttering to my core. My magic spilled out of me, pouring into him while I mapped out his mouth with my tongue. He whimpered as his pain flooded into me; he’d been far more injured than he’d let on. I pressed my hips into him, shamelessly grinding him through his pants, soaking them as I rode the line between pleasure and pain.

He slid a hand between us and I gasped as his fingers found my most sensitive spot. He stilled. “Is this alright? Did I—”

“Shut up,” I breathed. I didn’t recognize my voice. “Please don’t stop.”

He kissed down my neck as he swirled a finger around my entrance. He cursed low and slow, his breath hot against my skin.

“You’re so wet for me.”

I threw my head back in pleasure but he grabbed me by my nape.

“Keep your eyes on me,” he demanded. “I want to see every beautiful expression I coax out of you.”

I obeyed, my hands on his shoulders as he worked my clit with one finger, another sliding inside me. I kept my eyes on his twilight gaze and even as he ruined me, I wanted more. My hips rocked as I tried to drive him deeper into me. I hated him for how much he made me crave. I hadn’t known temptation until my lips first graced his and now it was all I knew.

From the moment I’d met him I’d shattered rule after rule, becoming someone I no longer recognized chasing the feelings he inspired in me.

My core tightened as he drove my pleasure higher and higher. He curled his finger inside me and white exploded across my vision. I bit my lip to

stifle the lewd cries trying to crawl out of my throat.

Vez pulled my lip free, sliding his thumb into my mouth. “Don’t you dare hold back, Iliyana.”

The noises escaping me were obscene, his finger in my mouth making each moan wet and indelicate. His eye contact was unrelenting as he praised me for how well I rode his hand.

I kissed him, moaning into his mouth as he drove me to the edge. He devoured each noise, feeding me some of his own. He peppered kisses along my jaw, whispering in my ear. “Can you handle more?”

I bobbed my head eagerly.

“I want to hear you say it. Tell me what you want.”

“I want more,” I moaned, my head swimming in a haze of lust as I tried to form words. “More of you than is proper.”

“I think we’ve gone far beyond what’s proper,” his laugh was breathy, tickling my skin between kisses. “How much of me can you take, Iliyana?”

“All of you.”

He slid another finger inside me and I cried out. The stretch was so deliciously painful. “Are you sure?” his voice was a taunt.

“Yes,” I sighed into his skin, my nails digging bloody crescents into his shoulders as I begged him for my ruin. “Give me more.”

He ran his hand down my back, tracing my spine. I arched into it, clenching around his fingers as they filled me to the brim, pumping me languidly. Then he pulled me close, laying me down, never taking his fingers from me.

The stone was cold against my back but his thumb tracing circles around my sensitive bud warmed me through. He leaned over me and I watched the muscles in his bicep work as he plunged his fingers into me, pulling them out slowly, over and over. Vez’s twilight eyes sparkled like stars as he admired me.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he said it like it hurt him. Like he was as desperate for me as I was him.

With the only light in the cave coming from the moths, I hadn’t noticed the sun setting. Vez’s eyes glowed violet, his pupils golden slits. His sharp teeth were long fangs. Two, glittering black horns shot out from his temples, wrapping around his forehead and curving upward like a crown of obsidian. Wings protruded from his back, dark and leathery like those of a bat.

He hadn’t noticed his change, but his eyes widened when he caught the line of my gaze. His muscles drew taut, fear stilling him. I cupped his cheek, moisture brimming in my eyes because I couldn’t look away. I’d never be able to look away.

“So are you,” I breathed. “The most beautiful creature I’ve ever laid eyes on,” I said, hating him for it. He’d ruined me.

And I let him. Wanted it. Craved it. What had I become?

“I want to taste you,” he said and I no longer cared what I’d become. Not when he looked upon me with reverence glittering in his eyes, his lips parted and his breath tickling my thigh. He threw my leg over his shoulder and I startled when my hoof kicked his wing. He dragged his tongue in one languid lick over my heat, looking at me in question.

“Yes,” I breathed.

“Let me hear you say it.”

He peppered kisses along my hips, raising a fire in my core as a sharp pressure began to build behind my skull. Anxiety washed over me as I realized my horn was coming. As terrified as I was of the pain, the irony didn’t miss me that it would be now, while I had a demon between my legs that my horncoming began.

Vez noticed my pinched expression and tried to pull away, but I grabbed him by the horns.

“Devour me, Vesper. Ruin me so that I know nothing else but the feel of your tongue.”

He stole a quick glance at my forehead before returning to my pleading eyes. He leaned over me, tipping my chin up to kiss me.

“When you cry out,” he said against my lips, “don’t call for your Tree or whatever gods you worship. I only want to hear my name.”

He made his way back down slowly, giving attention to each sensitive spot. Nipping at my ear, dragging his tongue down my neck, pressing gentle kisses down my chest, flicking his tongue over my nipples. With every small noise that escaped me, he teased and worked the spot until I cried out his name before moving to the next.

I was panting by the time he made it between my legs, my walls clenching desperately around nothing. My forehead burned as if someone held a hot iron to it—my horn was breaking through the skin. Vesper wasted no time, pressing his lips around my throbbing clit and sucking so fiercely I went delirious with the mix of ecstasy and agony. My eyes rolled back and I

arched into his mouth. Vibrant color splashed across my vision just as he rammed two fingers inside me. An animalistic groan clawed up my throat and I grabbed onto his horns as he carried me to hell, his name on my tongue like a prayer.

SEVEN

Unicorns are the fruit of the sacred tree. You are born by the Sacred Tree, and ONLY the Sacred Tree.

—Sixth Commandment of The First Unicorn

I HAD TO KILL HIM.

He held me in his arms, pressed against his heartbeat like I was something precious he was terrified of losing. Neither of us spoke of our transformations. My fingertips danced along his horns, tracing from base to sharp tip, over and over. He pressed gentle kisses around the knot where my horn had broken through. His feet were wrapped around my hooves, our tails tangled together.

We slept together like that, wrapped in each other's arms, sharing breath and stealing kisses. I couldn't tell the beat of my heart from his. For that night, I was his and he was mine. And I decided, tiny opals falling from my eyes, that I would spend one final day with him. And when night fell, before my transformation was complete, I would kill him.

Because I was Iliyana Sanctitas, and I couldn't be a perfect unicorn if I'd given my heart to a demon. He had been right to deny me, as much as it angered me. I would be giving up on my sisters' love, on the Sacred Tree, on ever having them look upon me with pride. The Seed of Life would never reveal itself to me if I gave into my desires to remain with Vesper. What if I was the last unicorn to ever hatch from the Tree?

I had to vanquish him to prove I was still pure, still perfect. To ensure the safety of the Tree, to protect my sisters, to keep the past from repeating

itself.

When he slipped into my dreams he found the nightmare of doubt waiting for him.

"ILIYANA," his voice was frantic.

To say my head was splitting would have been an understatement. All the pain I'd experienced in the past few days, every sensation I thought a horrific torment was nothing compared to my horn coming in. When I opened my eyes, my vision swam. There were countless Vez's all looking at me with terror in their twilight eyes.

"You're bleeding."

I brought a hand to my forehead and my fingers came away sticky with blood. The sight no longer disgusted me.

"Yes," I agreed. "It's normal." I tried to sit up but the cave lurched. Vez caught me, pulling me into his lap, wiping crimson from my brow.

He frowned. "Are you in pain?"

"What do you think?"

He cringed and my lips quirked. "It is nothing I cannot handle." I was made for this.

"Is there anything I can do?"

All my sisters bathed in the spring when their horns came. "My canteen," I said pointing to my discarded pack on the cave floor.

He unscrewed the top and brought it to my lips. I took it from him and poured it over my head, letting the cool waters wash over me. It felt like being home and the sweet nostalgia made the pain bearable, if only for a moment.

Vez followed the water's trail, his throat bobbing as it slid between my breasts. He looked like he wanted to drink it from my skin. I ignored the little spark of need his expression ignited, handing him the canteen.

He shook his head. "What about you?"

"It never empties. Drink," my voice was sharp. I appreciated his concern for me but not at his own expense.

As he drank his fill, I stood and unclasped my dress from the back of my neck and let it pool at my feet. Vesper choked on the water but kept his eyes forward. My locs were long enough to cover my breasts, but it wasn't as if I had anything to hide from him after last night. What did modesty

matter after the things I'd done with him, the sins I'd committed for him? I removed my necklace, dropping it in the pile of silk and dainty chains I no longer needed.

Vez's twilight eyes twinkled as he looked upon me like the perfection I would soon be. I reached out my hand and when he took it I wished, for a single foolish moment, that I didn't have to let it go.

I HADN'T SEEN WHERE Vez took us after the Chitterfang, but I had no trouble finding it. I could feel the weight of its death, a decrepit tendril on my soul pulling me forward. Vez never let go of my hand, caressing my thumb with his. I hated how much it felt like a promise.

He stole glances at my swollen forehead, offering to carry me every few minutes.

"My legs are fine," I said a little too harshly, but if he noticed, he didn't care. I gritted my teeth and instantly regretted it.

"But aren't you in pain?"

"It comes in waves."

"You'll tell me when it hurts, right? So I can carry you?"

"You'll know," I said through my teeth, "because it will bleed."

He didn't say anything for the rest of the way but neither did he stop his gentle caress.

His fingers were still intertwined with mine when we reached the corpse of the Chitterfang.

"Do you know what it is?" I asked him.

His brows pinched like he was confused by the question. "A beast of the Mysticwood. I don't know its name. Do they all have names?"

I didn't know whether to be frustrated or relieved by his ignorance.

"It is the creature born of the roots of the Sacred Tree. It is a Chitterfang, a guardian."

He swallowed. "What does it guard?"

"Unicorns."

Vez flinched, turning away. Neither of us spoke for a long while. I hoped he might explain himself. He may not have known I was to be a Unicorn when we met, but there was no way he didn't know now. I knew he meant me no harm, that he wanted me like I wanted him. The Chitterfang only went after him because he craved humanity and my blood was the only

thing that would give him that. But he wouldn't hurt me to get it. I only wished he would tell me.

I sighed. "It has to be returned to the land."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Don't you think you've done enough?" I said, unkindly. As if it were his fault and not mine. As if his choices and his alone led us here.

I wanted him to lash out and tell me I was just as at fault as he was. To insist that every choice we'd made these past few days had pure intentions behind them, because there was something growing between us that neither of us wanted to deny. That we weren't really snow and ash, virtue and sin. We were Vesper and Iliyana and we were better together.

"I'm sorry," was all he said.

WHEN NIGHT FELL, I refused to look away from him. I watched as horns grew from his skull, crowning him in obsidian; as wings sprouted from his back; as a tail extended from his spine; as his violet eyes glowed, his pupils bleeding into golden slits, I watched and I tried to find him hideous. I tried to hate him. To fear him. I searched for any hint of revulsion buried within me.

I failed.

He was even more beautiful now that he was fully himself, and I tried to believe I hated him, that I hated myself for loving him. I hated myself for every mistake I willingly made for him. I hated myself for casting aside perfection and benevolence and chastity and committing the worst of sins to keep him safe. I hated myself for knowing that as long as he lived, I'd do it again and again.

And so he had to die, before my horn came all the way in, while I was still Sanctian and not yet a unicorn. It would be the last sin I'd ever commit, and then I would be perfect again.

The Seed of Life would reveal itself to me and I would go back to my sisters as a hero, leaving my heart behind in the process.

I tried and tried and tried to convince myself that that was the truth. That was what I wanted. Because perfection was paramount to my petty desires.

We'd returned to the amethyst grove. The moonlight reflected off the crystals cast us in a pale violet haze.

“Shall I sing to you tonight?”

“Yes,” I agreed, noticing he hadn’t said *to sleep*.

He brushed my locs behind my ear and wiped the blood from my emerging horn from my brow. When he sang, his voice was just as lovely as the rest of him. My eyes burned and watered as he waxed poetic about a demon chasing a dream that led him to the most perfect unicorn and how his love tainted her. He sang it like a declaration. Emotion swelled from his words; his song was a confession, an apology, and a farewell all wrapped into one bittersweet ballad.

And when he stopped singing, he handed me his broken knife, eager to sacrifice himself for the sake of my purity. As if my wicked plan didn’t bother him one bit. Opals slipped from my eyes.

My head burned, the pain quickening my breath as my horn pushed forward. Hot liquid poured down my face, sorrow and rebirth.

“Vesper,” I breathed.

He pressed the knife into my hand. The serrated blade’s edge had snapped off, a violent reminder of his attempt to protect me from my guardian.

“It’ll still work,” he promised me. He wasn’t even going to fight me.

“Vesper,” I objected.

He pulled me into his lap as he lay back in the grass. Wrapping his hands over mine, he guided the knife’s jagged point directly above his heart.

“Right here,” he pleaded, “as hard as you can.”

“We shouldn’t have ever met,” I lamented weakly.

“Do you regret it?” he asked.

“No,” I said without hesitation.

“Good,” he smiled, tears sparkling in his violet eyes like stars. “Then I can die happy.”

I should have been grateful. It was what I wanted, what I needed to do. He had tainted me—no I had tainted myself loving him. We couldn’t be. Myrella would be so ashamed of what I’d done with him, what I’d done *for* him. Blood ran over my nose, opals fell from my eyes, raining crimson jewels onto his chest.

Gratitude was the furthest from my mind.

“I broke everything for you,” I wailed.

The forest quieted, woodland creatures gathering between the trees to watch.

“I know,” his voice was strained, his gaze watery.

“I should never have saved you.”

“I’m glad you did,” his smile was soft. As if he were at peace with this. I hated how easily he gave in.

“I wish I never kissed you,” I spat, the falsehood bitter on my tongue.

“I’ll never forget that you did.” He accepted the lie with undue grace.

“I shouldn’t have fallen for you,” my voice cracked around the words.

He cupped my cheek, my blood ran down his arm. “I wanted to be human so that I could be loved by someone like you.”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I raised the knife above my head. It was that moment–with the threat of violence tainting the air–I finally realized that it wasn’t him or even myself that I hated, but every rule that forced me into a box that was never meant to fit. I detested The First and every commandment that made something as beautiful as love into a sin.

I bellowed, a mighty roar that had no business coming from me. The animals watching us fled. My skull felt as if it were splitting in two as my horn came in fully. There was a small chance Myrella might forgive me, might agree that vanquishing him was fair atonement for my sins. I screamed with everything I had and I brought the knife down.

His eyes snapped open when I drove the knife into the ground next to his face. Myrella’s opinion was no longer my top priority.

“Then why won’t you fight for me?” I demanded.

His breath left him in a rush and he blinked a few times as he tried to ascertain the situation. His brows twitched, drawing together like he couldn’t understand.

“What?”

“Why are you lying down and waiting to die when I am right here?”

Meeting him was a rebirth. From the moment I kissed him, I’d started thinking for myself, making decisions based on what made me happiest rather than what Myrella would approve of. She would claim I’d fallen from grace but that couldn’t be further from the truth.

I jumped. And I’d take the leap again and again as long as Vesper met me at the bottom. I’d become someone else because of him, and as hard as I tried to convince myself that I was wrong for it, I couldn’t believe it. Nothing in this world had ever felt as right as being with him.

“I’m not good enough for you,” he snapped.

“Do you want me, Vesper?”

He shook his head in disbelief as if I were misunderstanding something obvious. “I’m sin incarnate and you’re everything that is good and so much more. You deserve better than me.”

I grabbed his face with enough force that the slapping sound scared off the few birds who’d lingered.

“For fuck’s sake, Vesper! Do. You. Want. Me?” I asked. “Because I want you. With everything I am, I want you exactly as you are. Wings and all, sin and all, human or demon Vesper, *I want you*.”

The stars glittering in his eyes overflowed, and I tasted his tears, leaving bloody kisses on his cheeks. “Don’t make me ask you again.”

“Yes,” he breathed. “I want you more than I want humanity, more than life. I want you. I love you, Iliyana.”

“Then I am yours,” I declared just before I pressed my lips to his, ichor and tears mingling between us. “And you are mine, Vesper. Forevermore.” I tangled my tongue with his, forcing a miracle.

The kiss was yet another metamorphosis and as I moved my mouth against his, I let go of the me I was before him and embraced the me I was becoming. I didn’t need Myrella’s approval as long as I had my own.

I was Illiyana Sanctitas and I was a perfect fool of a unicorn, madly in love with a demon.

Sunlight bled from my horn as it transformed under my realization. I could see it in my mind’s eye, the pearlescent twirls fell away, leaving a dark scythe of a horn that glittered like the first stars twinkling during twilight.

Vesper pulled away as my metamorphosis continued. Bathed in moonlight with only him and the amethyst surrounding as my witness, I became a unicorn.

My body was nothing like I’d imagined it would be. My coat was nothing like my sisters’ had been. It didn’t shine like sunlight or reflect like rainbows. It was dark as the night, and it glittered like stars, like Vesper’s eyes when he looked at me. Even my mane stayed true to my hair—deep red like old blood, tight curls twisted into perfect locs.

His touch was feather light as he caressed my muzzle and a soft whinny escaped me as I leaned into it. When I met his gaze, I was overcome by the

reverence there. I turned and threw a few pointed glances over my back. His eyes widened.

"Are you sure?"

Yes, I answered sharply, stomping a hoof into the ground.

Vesper brought a hand to his chest in surprise. "I can hear you," he said, voice tinged in awe. "I hear you in my heart."

Of course you do. I declared you mine with my blood on both our tongues.

He startled with the confession, his tongue swiping over his lips as if he were just now noting the taste of me there. Then his hands rushed to his head, confusion pinching his brow as he found his horns still there.

You're perfect as you are. I told him. *As am I.*

Slowly, he gave me one of his heart stopping smiles. Then he climbed atop my back.

EIGHT

You must never taint your tongue with a lie.

—Seventh Commandment of The First Unicorn

I NEVER THOUGHT my first run as a unicorn would be with a demon on my back, and if you'd have told me just three days ago that I'd happily break every commandment of the First for him, I'd have called you a liar.

But I'd have been a liar myself, if I continued to deny my feelings for him. I'd have been a filthy fabricator if I said I wasn't the happiest I'd ever been with him on my back, his hands tangled in my mane, his laughter on the wind as we rode through the forest.

I leapt over mossy boulders and galloped over gnarled roots, the forest more beautiful than it'd ever been in this form. The bond I'd made between Vesper and me grew as we rode and his joy seeped into me, hugging all my insides as if it were my own. His laughter grew wilder as my elation bled into him like sparkles in his veins. The world around us was a dark smudge of color tinted with our blithe.

"There's a ravine ahead," he yelled over the wind.

Hold on tight.

Vesper's thighs gripped tight around me as he fisted my dense mane. I pushed forward, running faster and faster, our hearts beating as one, pounding like jack rabbits. Just before we reached the edge, I leapt into the sky. He flapped his wings, and together we swam through the stars.

It was a jump I'd have never taken on my own. Vez howled when we made it to the other side, and all I could think of was how much I wanted to

hug him. My horn glowed in response, wrapping my body in a shimmering cosmos. One moment was atop my back and the next, we were floating together midair, wrapped in each other's arms.

"You can change back," he said as we landed.

"Do you prefer me this way?"

"No," he said without hesitation. "You're perfect regardless of the form you take."

His mirth was mine and mine his, and when we kissed, it was passing the most precious of gifts between each other. We held each other close, hands gripping each other's faces. Blithe melded softly into desire, the way a feather fell to the earth. Soon, Vez had me against a tree, kissing me like he would never have enough of me.

His lips made hot trails down my neck and along my collarbone. I arched into him, the curtain of locs down my back separating my skin from bark. He hoisted my legs around his waist, his mouth on my nipple as I wrapped my arm around him.

"I thought you meant to bend me over against a tree," my voice was a breathy moan.

"I will." His smile was absolutely feral. "But I need to see every expression that goes across that pretty little face while I make you mine for the first time."

"I've always been yours," I returned his primal grin with one of my own.

He shifted and I grabbed his shoulders as he held me with one hand, fisting his dick in the other. I gasped as he rubbed the tip against my slick entrance, swirling and stretching me softly. He slowly slid inside me and my head fell back as a little groan vibrated through my throat.

"Look at me, beautiful." I locked eyes with him and he stilled, giving me time to adjust. "Breathe," he told me. He kissed me right at the base of my horn when I obeyed, the silent praise making me twitch around him. "I'll only give you as much as you can take."

"I want all of you."

"You'll have me," he kissed me in the same spot, slowly making his way down to my mouth as he seated himself fully inside me. "Until you grow sick of me."

I bit his lip, hard enough to taste him and kissed him until the sharp pain came back to me. "Until the end of time," I corrected him.

“Until the end of time,” he agreed.

“Now fuck me like you mean it, *my prince*.”

Vez gripped the flesh around my hips, squeezing tight enough to bruise as he pulled out to the tip and slammed back into me. He repeated the motion, slowly pulling out only to slam back in, punctuating each thrust with a word. “Are. You. Sure?”

“Yes,” I cried, calling out to the Great Tree.

Vez bit my neck, his teeth sinking into me and making me whimper. The pain made the pleasure sweeter as he murmured against my skin. “Naughty girl.”

That was all the warning I got before he pounded into me at a brutal pace, my heavy breasts bouncing painfully. “I only wanna hear my name when I’m inside you.”

“Vesper,” I screamed. My mind spun and my thoughts melted away. All I felt was him as he took me higher and higher. “Vesper, I’m going to—

“Not yet, beautiful.”

“What?”

“You’re not allowed to cum without asking your prince for permission,” his smile was vicious.

“I can’t,” my eyes rolled back as bliss wrapped my stomach in deliciously tight knots.

“Yes, you can,” he said. “And look at me while you do it.”

“Please, Vesper.”

He captured my nipple in his mouth, biting down, never letting up on his relentless pace. “You need to be specific, Iliyana.”

“Please, can I cum, Vesper?”

He pulled back just enough to grin at me as he went impossibly faster. His eye contact was as unrelenting as his pace and I got the sense he was no longer looking at me but *into* me.

My walls clamped down around him and I bit my lip, little sounds escaping me as I tried to hold back my release. Vesper’s twilight eyes sparkled, a wicked mix of glee and awe in his expression.

“Yes, beautiful. Come undone for me.”

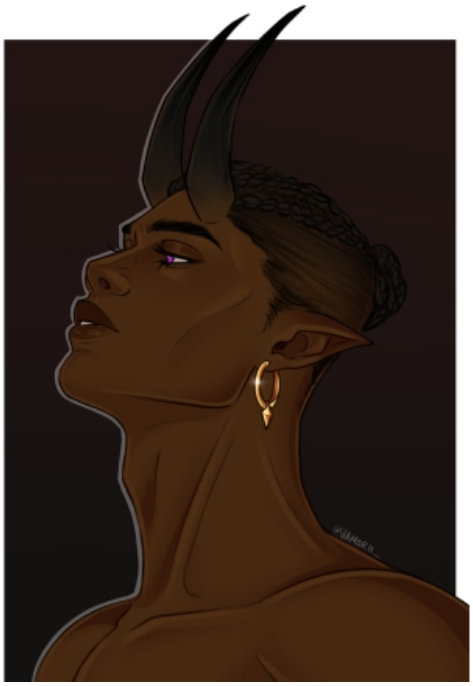
The world fell away, leaving me with nothing but glittering twilight eyes and euphoria. Pleasure hummed through my skin, my nails digging into his shoulders as he rode me through it. Vesper found his release in the

middle of mine and my soul rattled loose, tangling with his as he filled me with his seed.

Our bodies ceased to be, time stilled and we were nothing. We were everything. We were stars pouring into the sky, filling the galaxy. We were light and dark becoming one; we were life and death, the beginning meeting the end. We were infinite. My essence wrapped in his, two colors becoming one, two elements creating something better, something more. It may have been seconds, it may have been eons, it mattered not. I held him as he held me and when we were of two minds again, something appeared.

A spirit, a soul, *a seed*. It was light and shadow and color and so much more than I could put words to. It was a part of him wrapped in a shard of me, and it would hatch from the Sacred Tree.

THE END...



Bonus Content from Vesper

It wasn't the first time I'd woken with a strange woman sleeping on my chest but it was the first time it hadn't filled me with the bitter bite of shame. She wasn't snoring or drooling like the women I exhausted with my...services. She was sound asleep with the most peaceful expression. Everything about her was ethereal, from the comforting energy radiating from her to the impossibly soft feel of her skin everywhere it pressed against mine.

Long burgundy locs were pulled away from her face, revealing the diamond shape in the middle of her forehead. It was a few shades lighter than her pale chestnut skin and framed with shimmering gold paint—a sun surrounding it with rays that stretched over her forehead and down across her eyes. There was a birthmark over her right eye that only added to the uniqueness of her beauty. I'd never seen a woman like her.

I ran a finger over her pillowy bottom lip and her nose scrunched up as she shook me off. A breath of a laugh slipped from my mouth but I cursed when she hiked her plump thigh up over my waist. My second head reacted immediately, and I took a deep breath, trying to divert my thoughts before lust made me slip into her dreams. She looked so damned sweet and she probably felt even better—fuck. No. So much for diverting my thoughts.

She gripped my shoulder, snuggling herself closer and I didn't know how long I'd be able to keep myself out of her dreamscape. Maybe if she were a bag of bones with sharp elbows and pointy hips digging into me I'd be able to keep my mind clear, resist the lust pulling my consciousness out.

But every part of her was soft and plush and warm and my dick twitched at each small movement.

She probably dreamt of bouncing through clouds and sliding down rainbows, or whatever it was that innocent maidens dreamt of. I'd bedded more than my share of maidens, none of 'em innocent. I didn't wanna taint her dreams—taint her. I'd come all this way—

My memories flooded back in a torrent, a chill going down my spine, my eyes stinging as I blinked back tears. I should've been dead. I thought I *was* dead. Such a swell of relief filled me that I wanted to laugh or cry, or fuck, both. The last thing I remembered was going numb to the agony, my fingers and toes cold, and the suffocating regret that I'd die without ever knowing the warmth I craved.

I hugged her, pressing a kiss atop her crown of locs. She saved me. But why? Couldn't she tell what I was? And how? Her ears were pointed like mine, but much longer. So not a demon, maybe an Elf. I didn't know of anything else that would have that kind of magic...unless. No.

She couldn't be.

Shit.

I hadn't wanted to invade her dreams, but I had to know.

A heavy sigh heaved its way out of me. I never invaded dreams intentionally; lust always yanked me into another's consciousness. My lust, theirs, it didn't matter as long as desire was present; my own will was trampled on.

But I could. Just this once.

I tilted her head up and pressed my lips to hers. They were addictingly soft and I had to stifle a groan at how *right*—how familiar they felt.

And then I was in.

It wasn't bouncing on clouds, but frolicking through fields was close enough. A rainbow haze hung in the air and the rays of sunlight were as warm as a hug. A woman sat at the base of a massive tree, plucking joy from a harp. She was in the middle of a group, and though they were all impossibly gorgeous—with glowing brown skin and cascades of curls and legs for days—she was otherworldly in her beauty.

But something was off. Her smile looked painted on, and the mark on her eye was missing. How sad, I thought, that she'd shrink herself for others in her own dream.

It reminded me so much of myself that I almost didn't notice.

Each and every one of them had a single pearlescent horn.

I was ready to yank myself from her dreamscape when everything changed. It started with a scream and the haze of ephemeral perfection fell away, a nightmare turning everything black.

Her glamour melted off and all her sisters turned into demons but not my kind. They were nothing as fearsome as sin incarnate but they were just as real to her as I was, the demons of her subconscious. I had no right to invade her dreams and even less right to change them, but her pain was far too familiar.

Her yearning for acceptance, her desire to be forgiven for the way she was born, mirrored my own self-hatred. I couldn't stand to see the way her beautiful features contorted with pain, jewels falling from her eyes like tears.

I didn't want to reveal myself to her, so I turned to my magic. Sex demons may have been controlled by lust but we had dominion over most feelings. Using a song, I pulled on the joy buried within her, warming her from the inside out.

I DIDN'T WANT TO BELIEVE it. I could've slipped into the dream of an Elf that wanted to be a unicorn. That wasn't the most unlikely possibility in the world. I mean, fuck, I thought unicorns were animals. Not women. Impossibly kind and beautiful women.

She knew what I was, I held no illusions she was too foolish to have realized it.

And yet.

The way she looked at me didn't change. Every Demons-blessed time she looked at me, it stole my breath. I knew attraction when I saw it and there was fucking wonder in her eyes as she watched my every move. She looked at me like she could see another world in my gaze and she wanted to live there. And when I watched recognition dawn on her, that expression *didn't change*. She knew I was a demon, and there was no revulsion, no fetishization, just pure unadulterated wonder.

I had to get away from her. I didn't deserve that. Not from her, not from someone who'd never even thought to swat a fly. Someone who could cry for a life I only considered dinner. Someone who would save a stranger in the woods simply because it was the right thing to do.

Sin knows I wanted it. I wanted that kind of compassion more than I wanted air, but she was too good for me. I'd let her down. She may as well

have been an angel. I had no business wanting her the way I did.

And I certainly couldn't kill her to gain my humanity. The irony there made a bitter laugh escape me. A demon craving the angel he was meant to kill, to become human.

The only reason I wanted humanity was for the kind of future I could imagine with someone like her, the kind I was foolishly fantasizing about having with her. I thought I'd travel with her until I stumbled upon a unicorn, I'd slay it like some would-be hero, become a human, and ask for her hand.

What in Demon's name was I supposed to do if *she* was the unicorn?

If I were a better man, I'd leave the Mysticwood altogether. Resign myself to suffer through an eternity where the only women and men who spent any time with me were paying for it by the hour.

But I wasn't not a man, I was a fucking demon and I didn't want humanity if I couldn't have it with her.

So I came to this damned creek. I drank the rest of my waterskin—it still smelled faintly of her, sweet, floral, heavenly—and I mourned the loss of it as I refilled it. I found a patch of golden marigolds almost as pretty as her eyes and grabbed a few handfuls of them.

Even her vomit was cute. Wasn't that disgusting? I laughed, my back leaning against a tree as I recalled the rainbow of petals that spewed between her fingers. She was so delicate.

I had to give her the chance to get away from me if she wanted.

What if she was just too kind to leave me be after the state she found me in?

Sinking to the ground, I decided I'd wait. If she left, it was probably for the best.

But if she stayed, I'd give up on humanity and be the best damned demon I could if only to keep her by my side.

Keep reading for a teaser of KJ's short story, Sinful Education

Starlight Institute of Arcane Arts, second semester of Junior year

You stand there, feet sinking into the wet soil like gnarled roots. Your hand is gripped around your cane so tightly it trembles, and tears fall silently down your cheeks. You know, in the way that you know the moon is bright and the stars are plentiful, you *know* that you should do something. Say something. Make it stop.

And still you stand.

A voice, deep in your heart—no, your gut—tells you you're strong enough to stop this. You're strong enough, in fact, that you could have prevented this. But you don't think about that, no.

You simply watch.

Your chest aches, and whether your vision is blurry because of the rain or the tears, you're unsure. It doesn't matter, though, because you'll never stop hearing the screams.

As one love destroys the other, you stand and you watch and you listen and you do nothing.

Not because you agree with what's happening, no, you hate yourself for it. You resent her a little bit for it too, but you love her nonetheless.

You stand here and do nothing, simply because it's easier. It's less painful.

And you know you won't remember it anyway.

She won't let you.

You tell yourself the forgetting is a kindness.

She turns to you, sunlight still dripping from her fingertips, mana limiters glowing from her exertion. "This is your fault," she says lightly. As if the two of you were playing a simple game of chess and she'd won, but only due to your own folly.

When you say nothing, she smiles. All sunshine with none of the comfort, none of the warmth. "You have the power to change the world, and you'd waste it on him, on a devil," her voice drips with all the malice of the demons she so hates.

"I don't want to change the world. I wanted to change *his* world, I wanted to live happily in *my* world."

She shakes her head, disgust pinching her beautiful features. “He corrupted you, made you slothful. With him in the ground, you can be the savior humanity needs.”

You choke out a laugh.

“Something funny?”

“The way you wrap your jealousy up in a righteous bow.”

“Jealousy or not, I did the right thing. He was holding you back.”

“You’re wrong.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Sinful Education is a short story by KJ Bradford in *Ink-Stained Halos: A Dark Academia Anthology* coming October 2026

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KJ Bradford is a creator of worlds, living in Kentucky with her husband, daughter, and zoo of pets. She loves reading, cats, flowers, anime, and writing, but maybe not in that order. She's an awkward little dragon who either holes up in her writing cave or talks about her current obsession to anyone who will listen, with no in-between. Multiple stories are playing out in her head at all times and writing has become her solace as well as her entire personality. Her writing can be described as dark and swoony, gritty and fantastical. When she's not writing or reading, she's taking care of her amazing family while thinking about writing.

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